

ALFRED
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MYSTERY MAGAZINE

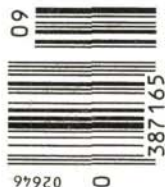
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NEW DETECTIVE
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EDITOR'S NOTES

by Cathleen Jordan

One of our most interesting (but time-consuming) jobs around the office is the finding of each month's Mystery Classic, involving as it does much reading and discussion of this author or that, this body of work or that one. In the process, we give consideration to all sorts of writers, "regulation" mystery writers or mainstream ones, some of them on the verge of being forgotten. Laying hands on the books of the latter group can be a piece of detective work in itself, as out-of-print books are often missing even from the New York Public Library, that great repository of nearly everything.

Therefore, it is a boon when stories come to us, as this issue's Mystery Classic did—in the hands of our film reviewer, Peter Shaw. He had found one

for us, he called me to say a couple of months ago. Had I ever heard of "A Double-Barrelled Detective Story" by Mark Twain?

No, I hadn't (and neither had anyone else I mentioned it to subsequently, even including several Twain enthusiasts). There you are, Peter said. This is a Discovery. It was a pretty *long* discovery, I said when I saw it; Peter said we could print it in two parts. (It even came that way, as it happened, conveniently divided in half by the author himself.) Not only that but, Peter mentioned, there was a surprise in Part Two. A surprise? I asked. But he wouldn't say another word. There was nothing for it but to read it.

Well, there is indeed something very unexpected in Part Two, and throughout there are

all sorts of other things—just about anything one might dream up. It's a mining camp story and a tale of vengeance, it's the story of a boy with a secret talent and of a worldwide pursuit. There's a wronged mother and a mistaken identity. There's even a character (in Part Two) named Ham Sandwich. The first half is dark and ominous, the second full of humor; there's . . . but that's

enough; we don't want to re-tell it here!

In any case, it's given us occasion to say that we do welcome suggestions from readers (or film reviewers) about potential Mystery Classics and where to find them. (Stories, please, that were first published before about 1955.)

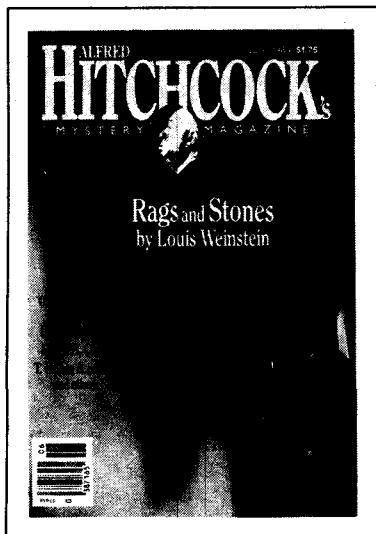
So if *you* have any discoveries, let us hear from you about them.

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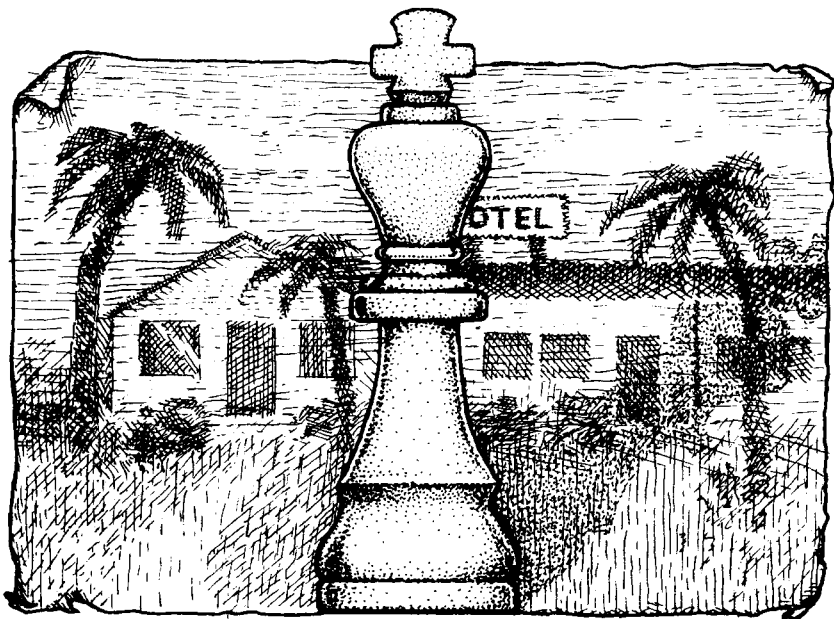
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Eternally Yours

by H. Edward Hunsburger



My name is Jeff Winsor and I'd like to say straight off and for the record that I don't believe in ghosts. I never have believed in them. I never will. And I can't think of one good reason why I should.

The whole notion of restless, prowling spirits strikes me as a waste of time. Even in the afterlife there must be better things to do than wander around

moaning and wailing, frightening poor mortals out of a good night's sleep. Messages from the recently departed are an even sillier idea. Let's face it, most people say far too much in one lifetime to have anything worthwhile left over for broadcasting from The Great Beyond. And as for things that go bump in the night, all I can say is that they never bump into me.

Illustration by Steve Karras

I figure it's over when it's over. You total up a life's credits and debits, rise quietly from the table, and cash in your chips. Maybe there's an after-life. Maybe there isn't. But either way, there are no such things as ghosts.

Now what I *do* believe in is the scarcity of good apartments in New York City. The kind of elegant, spacious apartments you find in those old but beautifully maintained buildings surrounding Gramercy Park. The kind of apartment I finally got to move into when Admiral Miles Penny tripped on the carpet and fractured his skull.

I'd like to be more sympathetic, but I never met the man. From everything I've heard, he'd led a long, full, if somewhat tempestuous life. Not to mention all the trouble he caused me *after* he died. But up until I moved in, the only connection between us was that I got his apartment. I'm not even going to go into what I had to do to get it or how much the rent is. Let's just say that wretched excess pretty well covers it all.

I moved into the place on October first, a week to the day after they moved Penny out to a less spacious but far more permanent address. I wanted to concentrate on unpacking, but I had an assignment due. I decided the cardboard carton ob-

stacle course would have to wait for a while.

As it turned out, both projects got sidetracked. Because that was the day the first postcard arrived.

It was jammed in the apartment door mail slot along with some catalogues from a shoe company, a bookseller, and one of those Vermont cheese and smoked ham places. It was an old postcard, yellowed at the edges, with a view of a few ragged palms and a seedy looking pink stucco hotel. All that was on one side. The following brief message was on the other.

Miles,

You were right about that adaptation of the Krimsky book. It stank. I didn't like the lizard scene either. Knight to C-3.

*Fraternally yours,
Charles*

Nothing unsettling there, nothing ghostly. Right? Just a chess-by-mail crony of Penny's who hadn't yet heard of his demise. That's what I thought too. The incongruity of it didn't hit me until later that afternoon when I was hard at work at my easel.

The adaptation that Charles had referred to was *Cold Moon*. It was a blockbuster novel that had recently been made into a

TV movie. It was the recently part that bothered me. The film had had its world premiere just five days ago. So how in the world could Miles Penny have an opinion about a movie televised after his death? I felt something like a chill along my spine. Inside my head a tiny voice started humming the theme from *The Twilight Zone*. Was the late admiral carrying on a correspondence from beyond the grave? Was heaven a seedy resort hotel? And was I, Jeff Winsor, nonbeliever in ghosts, being haunted, indirectly, by means of the U.S. mail?

A ringing phone cut short my crazed speculations. For a wild moment I thought it might be Admiral Penny trying to reach me *direct*. But as it turned out it was the earthy, and earthy, voice of Karen Hunter, the lady in my life.

"You sound a little flustered," she said after the usual preliminaries. "Anything wrong?"

I told her about the postcard. I heard a suppressed giggle, but at least she didn't laugh out loud.

"There has to be a rational explanation," Karen insisted. "You should try to contact this Charles guy who sent the card. Is there a return address? What about the postmark?"

I looked at the card again.

"There's no return address and the postmark's too blurred to be legible."

"Well," Karen sighed, "that's all I can think of. You've roused my curiosity about Admiral Penny, though. I remember you told me he died of a fall. Is there any possibility of foul play?" Her rich, contralto voice gave the last two words a lot of dramatic emphasis.

"Give me a break," I said. "The authorities pronounced it accidental death. He was going to get his mail when he tripped on the little rug in front of the door, fell, and fractured his skull. The realtor told me Penny was in his eighties. The bones get thin and brittle at that age. Any kind of bad fall can be fatal. There's no way it could be murder. The door was locked and bolted from the inside. They had a locksmith take the whole door off just to get into the apartment."

"He died on the way to get his mail," Karen said thoughtfully. "Doesn't that strike you as a strange coincidence? And now he's sending you messages, messages that come to the exact spot where the crime occurred."

"What crime?" I practically shouted. "Penny's death was accidental. And he isn't sending *me* any messages. He's writing to some guy named Charlie who's sending his replies here. What the hell am I talking

about? Penny isn't writing any-one. Penny is dead."

There was a moment of silence on the other end of the line. "Forget about the locked door," Karen said finally. "It doesn't prove anything. People are always getting murdered behind locked doors in mysteries. All of this," she said solemnly, "can only mean one thing."

"What?" I demanded irritably.

"That Admiral Penny was murdered. His restless spirit is calling upon you to bring his killer to justice. The poor man won't be able to rest in peace until you've solved this murder."

"I don't believe in ghosts," I shouted.

"See you tonight at eight," Karen cheerfully ignored me. "You'd better get busy on this. Painting book jacket illustrations for mysteries is one thing. Actually *solving* one might not be so easy."

Before I could get another word in, she hung up on me. I replaced the receiver and swore for a while. Karen's a terrific lady with more than her share of intelligence, beauty, and charm. The only thing she has too much of is imagination. She not only believed that there was a murder and a ghost involved in this. She really did expect me to solve the mystery.

And I knew I'd never hear the end of it if I didn't at least go through the motions.

Slightly dazed by my sudden elevation to amateur sleuth, I threaded my way through the cardboard-box jungle and went back to work. I make a comfortable living painting dust jacket illustrations for mystery and suspense books. I did all kinds of commercial art up until a few years ago when the cover I painted for *Death Is My Interior Decorator* won all the big awards in the field. Now I specialize in the crime stuff, which is fine with me because I like to read mysteries, too.

I'd barely gotten back into the painting when the doorbell rang. If this was the late admiral calling in person, I wasn't even going to bother unpacking. The apartment was nice but not *that* nice. As it turned out, it was only Tom Banks, the doorman.

"Getting settled in?" he asked with a friendly smile. A tall, broad-shouldered man in his early sixties, he has one of those open, expressive faces, the kind that seem readymade for smiles and laughter. I figured him for one of those rare people, a man who actually enjoys his work.

"Settled in," I answered. "I'll be lucky if I get everything unpacked before the two year lease is up."

Banks laughed and handed

me a stack of mail. More catalogues, from the look of it, and perched on top of them, you guessed it . . . a neat little pile of postcards. "I've been holding them downstairs," he explained. "Drayton, the postman, asked me to. He didn't want the moving or cleaning people tampering with the mail."

Better them than me, I thought.

"Very conscientious," I said aloud. "I've never been in an apartment building before where they deliver the mail right to your door."

"That's Drayton," Banks nodded. "Very dedicated to the job, he is. Never taken a sick day in twenty years. The perfect postman, I call him. He told me just the other day that he was being considered for mail carrier of the year."

"How about that." Just my luck. If he'd been a little less zealous, I might not have ever seen the damned postcard.

"Do the rugs look okay?" Banks asked. "They spent all afternoon on them. I guess they got all the blood out of that one," he added, peering down at the faded two by three Oriental I was standing on. It was the very same rug on which the admiral's sea legs had a fatal loss of footing.

"They look fine to me. When's the relative due?"

"Well now," Banks was suddenly evasive. "A couple of weeks, I guess. Shouldn't be more than a month or so." He spread his hands in a gesture of futility. "There's nothing I can do, Mr. Winsor."

"I'm not blaming you," I reassured him. Part of the deal for my getting the apartment was that I kept the admiral's stuff there until his only living relative arrived from some distant port of call. Apparently there was no more storage space in the basement of the building. I'd managed to cram most of his furniture and personal stuff into the spare bedroom. But there was no way I could get all the rugs in there, too. As a compromise the management had agreed to have the rugs cleaned before I moved in.

After wishing me well with the unpacking, Banks returned to his post in the lobby. I should have gone back to work myself, but I looked at the postcards instead. There were four of them in the pile of mail Banks had brought up, each with the same view of the rundown hotel. They were all from his friend Charles, with a chess move at the end of each message. Two of them seemed normal enough, but the other two carried obvious replies and comments to events that had taken place *after* Admiral Penny's death.

What the hell was going on

here? Was there chess after death? Was the U.S. Postal Service a *whole* lot more far reaching than I'd ever given it credit for? I hadn't taken the one card all that seriously, but this was something else again. Charles had signed all of the cards "fraternally yours." I wondered how Admiral Penny was signing the cards he sent to Charles? *Eternally* yours?

I was too keyed up by then to go back to the painting. I grabbed my jacket instead and went downstairs. I needed a walk in the park, something to get my mind out of neutral. Maybe I could come up with a couple of notions that would clear the whole thing up. The worst part of it was that I was actually starting to *believe* what Karen had said. That Admiral Penny had been murdered and that it was up to me, if I wanted the "haunting" to stop, to bring his killer to justice.

One of the advantages of living on Gramercy Park is the park itself. It's a small, fenced-in square of immaculately maintained greenery, to the best of my knowledge the only private park in New York City. A neighborhood association handles the upkeep, and the park is strictly reserved for area residents only. Some people might find it a little on the snobbish side, but I wasn't complaining. Since I now lived there,

I intended to make the most of it.

My new key fitted perfectly in the park's wrought iron gate. I closed it firmly behind me and began to stroll the graveled paths, enjoying the autumn sunshine while I tried to think detective-like thoughts.

I almost knocked the girl over before I saw her. She spun around and glared at me, a tall, willowy blonde with the face of a Botticelli angel. "I didn't hear you coming," she sputtered angrily. "You really ought to learn to walk louder." Her wide blue eyes narrowed as she focused in on me. "You're Winsor, aren't you? The fellow who just moved into 3C."

"That's right," I smiled. "And you're Tana Devin, the star of *Maneuvers*."

The recognition and the way I'd phrased it brought on a full-wattage smile. She'd obviously mistaken me for a fan of the show. *Maneuvers* was a new and very popular daytime soap, and Tana Devin played the vixen, the one you *love* to hate. She couldn't act worth a damn, but it didn't matter. Nobody else on the show could, either.

"We're neighbors, you know," she informed me. "I live right next door to you in 3B."

"You must have known Admiral Penny then?" If I was going to do some detecting, now was the time to start.

Her smile did a fast fade, and I could almost see the smoke from the smoldering anger that backlit those bright blue eyes. "Penny," she seethed. "Dropping dead was the only thing that man ever did that made me happy. He was the nosiest old crock in creation. Always looking through the peephole in his door to see who was coming in and going out of the other apartments on the floor. I could hear his raspy breathing every time I walked by. It was getting so I hated to invite anyone over. No privacy at all in my own damned building." Her blue eyes narrowed a little more as she studied my face. "I hope you're not going to be manning the peephole like Penny? I won't stand for any more of that crap." Her soft voice was suddenly as cold and merciless as an Arctic winter.

"Not me," I assured her. "I'm far too busy for that kind of nonsense."

"Glad to hear it," she said. "Just keep it that way and we'll get along fine." On that cheerful note, she turned away and strode down the path without a word of goodbye.

Well, I'd certainly learned one thing about the late admiral. Tana Devin hated him. Now, no one likes being spied on, but it's basically a harmless pastime. What I couldn't figure out was why Tana Devin loathed

Penny with such *intensity*. There had to be more to it than that.

After a couple more turns around the park, the answer came to me. The lovely Miss Devin's name had been in the papers quite a lot these past few weeks. Not the *real* papers but those supermarket tabloids they sell at the checkout counters. I vaguely remembered the headlines on one of them, some kind of sex scandal that linked Tana Devin with a prominent but very married politician. I remembered somebody's mentioning that the liaison had very nearly cost Tana her part in *Maneuvers*. While the show portrayed this kind of bedhopping all the time, the chairman of the company that sponsored it was an *uncle* of the politician's wife. I guess rating points won out over family ties because Tana did manage to keep her job. But the way I heard it, it had been a *very* close thing.

What I remembered best about the whole business were the pictures that appeared under the headline. Pictures of Miss Devin and the politico that had that slightly off, distorted quality that tends to catch an artist's eye. Exactly the kind of pictures you'd get shooting through an old fashioned peephole . . . just like the one on the door of my new apartment.

I was positive that that's what

Penny had been doing. A few candid snaps of the two lovers as they passed by the door might have fetched a good price. They would also make an obviously secret affair as public as the corner library. Was that motive enough for murder? As far as Tana Devin was concerned, I believed it was motive enough and then some.

I told Karen all about it over dinner that night. After all, it's no good being a detective if you don't have a Watson around to bask in your reflected glory.

"It's a nice start," Karen said, patting my arm. Not exactly the complimentary outpouring I'd been expecting. "But what you need is a few more suspects. Not to mention the *how* part of a locked room murder."

"Details," I muttered. "I just need a couple more days to put it all together." Not necessarily true, but it *sounded* good.

"Glad to hear it," Karen smiled. "Remember, I'm counting on you. I imagine Penny's ghost would like to settle down, too. I doubt haunting is all it's cracked up to be."

"I'm working on it," I said testily. "I do have a few other things to do, too," I reminded her.

The next morning I did one of them, putting in three hours at the easel. It was a cool, gray day with a steady syncopation of rain that drummed on my

windows. Atmospheric mystery story weather, but not much good for strolling in the park. So when I finally took a break from painting, I stayed indoors and inspected the scene of the crime.

Feeling as though I should be brandishing a magnifying glass, I knelt down in front of the little Oriental rug on which Penny had tripped and died. The cleaners *had* gotten all the blood out. I couldn't find a trace. I did notice something, though. When they yanked the cleaning tag off, they left a little nylon loop still threaded through the fibers. I teased it free and slipped it in my pocket.

I figured out the *how* part of the murder when I shifted my attention to the door. The mail slot was the key. Visualize Penny standing at the door, staring out the peephole, while someone, the murderer, crouched out of sight on the other side of the door. All the murderer would have to do was quietly open the outside mail slot and shove a stick or a cane through, knocking Penny's legs right out from under him. It was as simple as that.

"Brilliant deduction," I murmured to myself. I thought about phoning the police right away but decided to spring my theory on Karen first. Besides, I still had to figure out the *who* part. Tana Devin was a good candi-

date for the killer, but I hadn't even talked to anyone else yet. Also, I needed that little thing they call *proof*.

Just past noon I heard the postman at the door. I put down my brush and went to check the mail. It had slid through the slot and was lying on the little rug. Two catalogues and, of course, another postcard. It looked exactly like the other ones except for the message, which read:

Miles,

*How did you guess
that the prime rate was
going to drop two days
before it happened?
What have you got? A
crystal ball? Thanks for
the tip. Bishop to C-6.*

*Fraternally yours,
Charles*

Now Penny was giving financial advice from the Great Beyond. The prime rate had dropped earlier in the week, and from the cheerful tone of the note it appeared that Charles had taken advantage of Penny's powers of prediction. Was it just a lucky guess, or did Penny have special, inside information from Up There? I don't know what bothered me more, the postcard or the fact that the admiral hadn't taken the time to write *me* about the shift in the prime. It was the

least he could have done. After all, I was the one trying to solve his murder. If there actually *was* a murder. In spite of my theory about the mail slot and cane, I still wasn't one hundred percent convinced.

I figured I ought to talk to the postman, though. He might be able to tell me something more about Penny. I swung open the door and caught him just before he reached the elevator.

"Excuse me," I said. "I'm Jeff Winsor, the new tenant in apartment 3C."

"Lew Drayton," he introduced himself. "I'm sorry, Mr. Winsor, but there's nothing for you today. It usually takes a week or so for the forwarded stuff to start coming through." He smiled as if to say the delay was a shame but there was nothing he could do about it. He was a short, pudgy, moonfaced man with thick, rain-misted glasses. His postman's slicker glistened with moisture, and his bulging leather mailbag fitted the contours of his body as though it were a part of it.

"I'm not worried about my mail," I told him. "But I was wondering about Admiral Penny's. Are you going to keep on delivering it here? He died, you know."

"Yes, I heard," Drayton sighed. "A real loss to the community. As for his mail, there are a couple of ways to go. You

could mark it 'deceased, return to sender.' Or you could read-dress it to his next of kin, but Tom Banks told me the admiral's only living relative is out of the country at the moment. If you want my opinion, the easiest thing for you to do is just keep it here until the next of kin arrives to claim it. But that's entirely up to you," he added quickly. "I'll be glad to arrange it any way you want, Mr. Winsor. Just say the word."

His eagerness to oblige threw me for a moment. After all, this *was* New York, a city hardly noted for its zealous public servants. I'd forgotten that Banks had called Drayton "the perfect postman."

"Let me think about it," I said finally.

Drayton nodded. "Take all the time you want. Besides, most of Penny's mail is catalogues, like this one from Pitt's up in Maine." He reached out and tapped the catalogue I'd carried out into the hall with me, ignoring the postcard that rested on top of it. "Those Pitt brothers make a sweet rod and reel," he grinned, "but a little too pricey for me. If there's nothing else, Mr. Winsor, I'd better get back to work."

"Did you know the admiral well?" I pressed him. "Get along with him okay?"

"I just delivered his mail," Drayton shrugged. "And I get

along fine with *everyone* on my route. Got to get moving," he tipped his cap. "Don't like to keep my customers waiting." He waved and stepped into the waiting elevator where his bulky form was quickly concealed by the closing doors.

Feeling a little deflated, I wandered back into the apartment and spent a couple of minutes contemplating the park through my rain-streaked bay window. I guess after Tana Devin, I'd been anticipating something a little more meaty. But then everyone couldn't be a suspect. Drayton was just the postman. Like the fraternal Charles, an unknowing helpmate, a bearer of haunted mail.

I decided that if I really wanted to learn more about Penny, I should talk to Tom Banks. New York legend has it that doormen know everything about their tenants, all the little details ranging from shoe size to sexual preference. I hadn't thought about Banks before, but if there was any truth to the legend, he could be a regular well-spring of information.

On my way down to the lobby I was nearly bowled over by a big, gray-haired man who came catapulting out of the elevator.

"Sorry about that," he said as I regained my balance. "I guess my mind was somewhere else. I only wish the rest of me was, too," he added with sudden bit-

teness. He had the look of a businessman gone to seed. His tailor-made gray suit was wrinkled and stained. There were dark circles under his eyes, and the hand that gripped his ebony-wood walking stick was white-knuckled with tension. He blinked at me and frowned. "I don't remember seeing you before? Are you visiting someone in the building?"

"Just moved in," I told him. "I'm the new tenant in 3C."

"Penny's place," he said in a harsh whisper, as if the name itself was almost too painful to pronounce. "If I could have spared the time and the shoe-leather, I would have danced on the old bastard's grave. If anyone ever deserved to die, he was the one."

"What do you mean?"

"Mind your own damn business," he muttered, pushing past me. He stomped down the hall, cutting at the air with the gleaming ebon stick as though he were slashing away at some imaginary foe. He paused at the door of apartment 3A, unlocked it, and disappeared inside, slamming the door behind him with a thunderous crash that echoed through the hallway.

"Well now," I said to myself. "The suspect shortage is certainly over." Even death hadn't lessened the man's obvious hatred of Penny. And that gleaming ebon-wood walking

stick? I could practically see it cannonading through the mail slot to shove the old admiral's legs right out from under him. But who was this guy? I didn't even know his name yet. And why did he loathe the recently departed Penny?

I found Tom Banks at his post in the lobby, staring moodily out at the rainswept street. "Mr. Winsor," he turned and smiled at me. "Surely you're not thinking of going out in that downpour without so much as an umbrella?"

I shook my head. "I just came down to pass the time of day. I wanted to ask you about one of my neighbors, a big, gray-haired man in A? What's he got against Penny?"

"That would be Mr. Campbell." Banks sighed and shook his head. "He'll be leaving us at the end of the month. Some recent financial setbacks are forcing him to relocate."

"Why do I have the feeling that Penny is somehow involved in that?" I prodded him.

"Mr. Campbell isn't too good at hiding his feelings," the doorman nodded. "I guess there isn't any harm in telling you about it now. Mr. Campbell and his partner own a computer company. A few weeks back, the two of them were planning to take over another firm, a small company that unknowingly held a patent that would

give Campbell and his partner a virtual lock on a big, upcoming defense contract. Campbell sold off all his assets at a loss to raise the necessary capital, but before he could put in a bid, a rival firm bought the company right out from under them."

"How does Penny figure into it?"

"Well," Banks hesitated, "Mr. Campbell can't prove anything, but he and his partner were discussing the takeover when they walked by Penny's door. They had a longish wait for the elevator, so they pretty well covered it all. No one else knew about the deal, and with Penny's reputation for spying on his neighbors, he seemed like the only person who could and *would* have alerted the rival company."

"I could see why Campbell would hate him," I sympathized. "What about you, Tom? How did you get along with the admiral?"

"It's my job to get along with all the tenants," Banks replied with quiet dignity. "But now that he's gone, I have to admit that Penny was a hard man, the only one I've ever met who would go out of his way to make someone else's life miserable."

"You sound as though you might be speaking from personal experience," I said. The sad, regretful tone of his voice

gave him away more than any words could.

"It happened a few months back," Banks said softly. "Like the admiral, I'm a retired navy man myself. Now, I'm not one to ask for favors, but I have a grandson, a fine boy with all the makings of a naval officer. Ever since he was a lad he's wanted to go to the Academy. He has all the grades, the qualifications. All he needed was a recommendation, a little pull at the top to get him in. I asked Penny if he'd be willing to put in a word for the boy. All it would have taken was one phone call, a few minutes of his time. Well, first he said yes, then no, then yes again. By the time I realized he never intended to do it, it was too late to ask anyone else. It seemed as though he took a kind of perverse pleasure in keeping me dangling like that."

Although I'd never met Penny I was beginning to hate the man myself. "What happened to your grandson?" I asked Banks.

"He went into the navy as an enlisted man," Banks said bitterly. "There's no shame in that," he added, "but he would have done the Academy proud. He never had his chance, thanks to Penny."

There wasn't anything I could say to that. I left Banks staring out at the rain and went back

to the apartment. I was beginning to wonder how Admiral Penny had lived as long as he had. If he hadn't been murdered, he certainly should have been. I'd never come across anyone who was a more suitable candidate for homicide. I was also beginning to regret my own attempt at amateur sleuthing. *If* Penny had been murdered, his killer almost deserved to get away with it. I say *almost* because I still intended to solve the crime if I could. Penny had done some pretty horrible things in his life, but none of them as terrible as murder itself.

I spent the rest of the day and all that evening at the easel, finishing up my assignment. While my hand wielded the brush, my mind arranged and rearranged all the bits and pieces I had about Penny and his death. I had started out with no suspects, not even a proper murder. None of this would have come about if it hadn't been for the postcards and Karen's insistence that I investigate.

Now I had three suspects. Tana Devin and Campbell were the more obvious ones, but Tom Banks was also a possibility. He seemed quiet and friendly enough on the surface, but who could really tell what was going on inside? As for the murder part of it, my cane-

through-the-mail-slot theory eliminated the whole locked room element. It should have put Campbell at the head of my suspect list, but it didn't. Any one of them could have bought a cane and shoved it through the slot. And after Tana Devin's description of Penny's "raspy" breathing, any one of them could have easily ascertained if he was at his post on the other side of the door.

I had suspects, motives, and method. I had everything I needed except for the most important thing: a solution to the crime.

It was still raining when I turned in at midnight. The rumble of thunder and the crack of lightning punctuated my futile attempt to sleep. When I finally did doze off, I had the craziest dream. I was being chased through Gramercy Park by a giant postcard. And it would have caught me, too, if it hadn't been for the lifesized chessman. He was a white knight who poked a hole through the postcard with his uptilted lance. The postcard fell to the ground, but then the knight started bearing down on me, with his lance aimed straight at my heart.

That's when I woke up. Not only had I escaped the sinister pursuers of my dream but I'd come up with the solution to the mystery. And it was so simple

that I should have seen it right away. I still had some checking to do, though, just to make absolutely certain I was right.

The rain tapered off around six, the last of it disappearing with the dawn of a bright, autumn day. After an early breakfast I went downstairs for another talk with our friendly doorman.

"Who plays chess around here?" I asked after we'd exchanged good morning pleasantries.

The question seemed to take him by surprise. "Well now," he hesitated. "I play a little chess. Strictly amateur stuff. Drayton, the postman, and I often have a game on Sundays. Then there's Mr. Campbell. He's won a couple of local championships, and I know he spends a lot of his free time over at the Marshal Chess Club."

"What about Tana Devin?"

Banks frowned thoughtfully and nodded. "Now that you mention it, I believe she's a player, too. She once starred in an off-Broadway show called *The Chess Match*. So she must know at least the rudiments of the game, though I don't think she has much time for it. Are you looking for a game?"

"No," I said smiling. "I'm looking to *end* one."

Leaving Banks more confused than ever, I paid a brief visit to a local shop. After that

I returned to the apartment where I spent the rest of the morning experimenting at the scene of the crime.

When the postcard slid through the mail slot at a little past twelve, I was ready and waiting. I didn't bother to bend down and pick it up. I swung the door open instead, startling the mailman so much that he stumbled back, nearly losing his balance.

"Mr. Winsor," Drayton grinned. "I'm sorry but there's nothing for you today."

"That's okay," I told him. "I was wondering if you could mail this for me," I asked, handing him a postcard.

"No problem," he said eagerly. "I used to mail cards for the admiral all the time."

"I know you did."

He must have sensed something, either in my face or in the tone of my voice. "Now, what do you mean by that?" he asked quietly. He wasn't grinning any more.

"I figured it all out last night. The whole thing started with the postcards, but I got sidetracked for a while, never realizing that the answer was right there under my nose."

Drayton forced a smile. "You're talking in riddles, Mr. Winsor. I still can't figure out what you're trying to say."

"You're the perfect postman, right?"

"The best in the business," Drayton agreed.

I shook my head. "When I asked you what I should do with the admiral's mail, you listed several options, all of them dependent on the mail's being delivered *here*. You never once mentioned the routine procedure of having the post office *hold* it or putting in a change of address that would have sent it directly to Penny's next of kin. It would have been easier on both of us, but you never said a word. Because you wouldn't have seen the postcards any more. After all that time on the sidelines, you were finally in the game. You just couldn't bear to give it up, could you?"

"Are you accusing me of tampering with the U.S. mail?" Drayton bristled.

"I'm accusing you of reading some postcards," I said softly. "The ones Penny gave you to mail for him and the ones you delivered from his friend, Charles. You're a chess player yourself. It's only natural that you'd become interested in a game, especially if it were a good one. I didn't suspect you at first. But last night I realized that somebody else must be carrying on the game with Penny's friend Charles. You were the only one besides me with access to all the incoming postcards. And since Penny was an elderly man who spent most of his time

eavesdropping from behind the door, it seemed only logical that he'd give the outgoing cards to you to mail for him. It all came down to your being the one, the *only* person who could keep the chess game going after Penny's death. Charles must be a worthy opponent," I suggested. "Are you enjoying the game?"

"All right," Drayton said with a sheepish grin. "You caught me at it. Charles Fairfield is a top-ranked player just like the admiral was. I couldn't resist the challenge. After all these years of trying to second-guess them, I had to see if I could beat Fairfield myself." The heavysset postman shrugged. "All I did was write a few postcards and sign Penny's name to them. No harm in that, right?"

"No harm if the admiral hadn't caught you reading the cards in the first place," I corrected him. "These past few days I've learned just what kind of man he was. What you did was only a minor infraction of the rules. After all, postcards aren't *meant* to be private. But Penny would have complained just the same, ruining your standing as the 'perfect postman,' spoiling your chance to be named mail carrier of the year. But first he would have let you dangle for a while, enjoying the prolonged agony. The sight of you sweating it out, never knowing exactly when your

spotless reputation would be shattered beyond repair. He waited too long this time," I said quietly. "Long enough for you to kill him."

"Are you crazy?" Drayton sputtered. "Penny tripped on a rug behind a locked door. No way that could be murder."

I shook my head. "There are a couple of ways, but I didn't figure out the right one until last night." I dug the little loop of nylon cord out of my pocket and held it out for Drayton to see. "I found this knotted through the rug. The rug Penny tripped on when he fractured his skull." Involuntarily both of us glanced down at the faded Oriental. "At first I thought the loop was left over from a cleaners' tag. But then I remembered Tom Banks's comment that the cleaners had spent 'all afternoon' on them. They'd done the work right here. No reason to tag them if the rugs weren't leaving the apartment."

I prodded the nylon loop in my open palm. "I took this over to a sporting goods store this morning. The man in the fishing department identified it as a piece of deep sea fishing line, strong enough to withstand the pull of a fighting marlin. And I know you're a fisherman. You told me as much yourself when you talked about not being able to afford a rod and reel from the Pitt catalogue."

"What does that prove?" Drayton demanded. Behind his thick glasses his eyes had taken on a narrow, almost glowing intensity. Casually he slipped his mailbag off his shoulder and put it down on the floor. "It's real interesting," he said with a slow smile. "But it still doesn't add up to murder."

"Sure it does," I insisted. "I spent a lot of time this morning standing on that little rug with the door closed. Right off I noticed how the rug gets bunched up from shifting your feet around. It gets pushed up against the door and a little edge of it gets shoved *between* the door and the bottom of the frame. Not much," I emphasized. "Just enough to knot a line in it."

"Go on," Drayton prompted me. He was still smiling, but there was no pleasure at all in his voice.

"You must have done that part of it quietly," I continued. "Keeping well below the sight-line of the peephole. It would have been easy. Most of the tenants aren't around this time of day. Then you make your normal appearance, dropping the mail through the slot. When you hear Penny picking it up, you hurry away. The other end of the line was secured to something heavy and tough. Your mailbag is my best guess. It's perfect for the job. The sudden

pull on the line yanks the rug against the door and Penny with it. It was a pretty sure bet that something like that would fracture an old man's brittle skull. After you hear the crash, you just walk back and cut the line with scissors or a knife."

"You mean a knife like this?"

The short but lethal looking blade suddenly appeared in Drayton's hand.

"Just like it," I gulped.

"I thought he was my friend," he continued with quiet intensity. "He used to meet me at the door every day. I'd hand him his mail and he'd give me the cards to post for him. Then one day he caught me reading one of Charles's postcards. I guess he must have been suspecting it for a while. He wouldn't open the door after that. He'd just stand on the other side and taunt me, telling me over and over again that everyone would find out that I really wasn't perfect. I had to kill him. Don't you see? I *am* perfect. The perfect postman!"

He lurched toward me, the blade upraised. As he crossed the doorstep and stepped onto the rug, I gave the line hidden in my hand a tug. His feet went flying out from under him. The knife fell from his hand. He cracked his head against the doorjamb and sagged to the floor, unconscious but still very

much alive.

"Well, that's one ghost laid to rest," I said to myself. I reached behind a pile of boxes and switched off the tape recorder. Then I phoned the police.

Karen came over that night, long after they'd taken the raving postman away in a strait-jacket. I felt sorry for him but not *all that* sorry. He'd tried to kill me, too. I'd told her all about it on the phone, rubbing it in just a little when I reminded her about restless ghosts and hauntings by mail.

I wasn't surprised when she showed up with a peace offering. "Housewarming gift?" I asked, accepting the brightly wrapped package.

"Open it up," she smiled.

I did just that. "But I don't need a chess set," I protested. "I don't know how to play and I'm certainly not going to learn now. I don't believe in chess."

"What about ghosts?"

"I don't believe in them, either."

"Then what do you believe in?" Karen demanded.

I looked around me, taking in the endless stacks of cartons and crates, untouched since the movers had left them there except for the addition of a faint coating of dust. "The scarcity of good apartments in New York City," I said firmly. "That's what I believe in . . . I think."

FICTION

EMPATH

by Elliott Capon



Illustration by Jim Ceribello

The shark swam furiously back and forth in the enormous tank, angered not only by the bright glare of the TV lights but also by its intense hunger. It wanted to kill something, and it wanted a meal, and it would attack whatever entered the tank next.

Clark Penner stood on a makeshift diving board suspended over the tank, blinked at the lights, and prepared to jump into the water

When the Penners discovered that they were going to be parents for the third time,

they gave a lot of thought to their older child, seven-year-old Freddie. Freddie had been five when his mother presented him with a sister, and he had spent the next year throwing the infant out of her crib, spilling things on her, slapping her. The Penners were unable to afford a child psychologist, and ended up taking Freddie to a succession of county-run social service programs and nonprofit agencies. Freddie ended up with labels such as "malicious," "maladjusted," "genetically vicious," and "uncontrollable." They tried amphetamines and depressants, punishments and rewards. Freddie would not change his behavior patterns. The only thing that could keep

the baby safe was for Freddie to be under someone's constant eye.

Which was all right as long as there was just one child to look after. But with another one on the way, the Penners worried that Freddie might get to one or the other and do harm. No daycare center would have him: he was too much. No mental institution would take him: he wasn't enough. The Penners, to whom abortion was anathema, and so had to have this child, spent nine months worrying about the future health of their newest offspring.

Clark Sheldon Penner was born with little trauma to either himself or his mother.

For almost ten months Freddie never got within an arm's length of his new brother. He gave up abusing his sister, but no one realized it was because he was waiting, planning for the day when they would finally leave him alone and he could get his hands on the baby.

One day he did. A broken hose on the washing machine, a clumsy and slightly bleeding daughter, and an insistently ringing phone all distracted Mrs. Penner long enough for Freddie to run to his room, retrieve the dirty pocketknife he found in the street, and sneak into his parents' room where Clark lay,

blissfully contemplating swirling particles of dust.

Freddie crept with exaggerated stealth to the crib, the broken-bladed knife held in a tight fist over his head, drawn back for the plunge. Clark noticed the movement and turned his head to follow it. He must have realized something was amiss because his eyes got wide and his contented cooing ceased.

Freddie snickered and tensed his arm, preparing to bring the knife down.

And suddenly he was terrified.

His throat closed and his heart began to pound. A black and red roaring filled his eyes and ears. He had never known such fear, and the little infant in the crib was the cause of it. Freddie screamed and dropped the knife and ran to his room. His mother found him a few minutes later, cowering in the corner, unable to give her an explanation. Later that day when she brought Clark into the living room and Freddie saw his brother, he screamed again and ran back to his room, whence he couldn't be coaxed. Nor would he stop screaming.

That was enough for them to get Freddie institutionalized for life.

Clark Penner grew up a very likable child. No one, from the

most malicious little brat to the grouchiest old curmudgeon, could look at him and not return his warm, open smile. Eager to help him forget the supposed horrors of the day Freddie was taken away, his parents showered every possible luxury and joy on him, and he rewarded them by being the best, cheeriest child who ever lived. He made everyone happy.

Clark was eight when he experienced real fear for the first time in his memory.

He was somewhere he had no business being, a littered alley that led to a vacant lot that just a few years before had been a thriving apartment building. He picked his way amid the broken glass, crushed cans, misshapen woods and metals, forgotten garbage. In his childish fantasy, he imagined that he was both the owner and destroyer of a mighty empire, that he had caused all this chaos, and now lorded triumphantly over the remains, wallowing in his rights of chattel.

Unfortunately, there was another who claimed title to the alley: a dog, half German shepherd, half mastiff, made wild by years of living in the jungle of the city, the leader of a pack of similarly wild canines, out for his morning perimeter patrol. He didn't like the idea of trespassers.

Clark saw the dog, and didn't know how to react to it. Dogs were finely-manicured poodles or pampered Lhasa Apsos, or cartoon heroes; this one was big and dirty, wore no collar and no license.

The dog lowered its head and sniffed loudly. Clark was no threat; even so, he was violating the most basic laws of territoriality and had to be removed.

While Clark stood wondering what to do next, the dog bared its teeth in an evil grin and leaped for him.

Clark turned white and screamed.

The dog interrupted its leap and hit the ground with all four legs scrabbling to put its body in reverse. Ears laid back, tail between its legs, whimpering as if it had been scalded, the dog took off as fast as it could run. Clark did not bother to reason; he just sat down and cried.

Later, he thought about it.

All Clark's friends in junior high school were astonished at the way Clark managed to score consistently with the girls. They were all in varying degrees of puberty, were all going through the curiosities and unbridled lusts endemic to that period of life, and spent most of their waking hours in clumsy attempts to experience sex, as

boys their age have been doing for thousands of years. They would stand around in groups, talking to the girls, hoping that the more explicitly they talked, the more successful they would be. Then Clark would walk over, equally preoccupied. The only difference was that whichever girl Clark gave his attention to, whichever one he focused his desires on, would flush, breathe hard, and go back with him to his garage. One wag suggested that Clark had deflowered the entire seventh and eighth grades in their school. And with the exception of a few girls whom Clark did not find attractive, the wag was right.

Clark thought about that, too. An idea was beginning to form.

It wasn't until college, when he took a useless course in parapsychology designed to separate liberal arts majors from another three credits' worth of money, that he came across the word *empath*. One who can project emotions and feelings. One who can project his own fear to a wild dog, and scare it off; who can throw his own cheerfulness and warmth onto others; who can instill others with his own horny feelings.

Like a painful wave, the recognition of his talent — his gift?—broke over him. A

hundred, a thousand incidents now rushed to his conscious memory, and were explained. He had a Power. He could do anything he wanted with it—could control other people's emotions just by making them share his.

What to do with it?

Clark had what was basically a "decent" personality. He was as honest as the next man, as considerate and thoughtful. He was also as avaricious, for rare is the "next man" who, faced with the opportunity to score, to win something big his neighbors will never possess, turns down that opportunity. Clark did not want to rule the world, or set up a mansion of sex slaves; on the other hand, there was no reason not to try to capitalize on his empathic talent, now that he knew *what* he had and *why* he was capable of . . . of what? There was one friend he could turn to with this source of potential, untapped wealth.

Stewart Kogan was, in his own proud words, a "goniff." He would rather earn a devious penny than an honest dollar. Clark had met him in high school, and they continued on to college together. If there was a pyramid scheme going on, an insurance scam, a lottery, a stolen exam sale, a switched file, a missing piece of equipment, or anything else just barely le-

gal—or barely *illegal*—one could be sure that Stewart Kogan was in the neighborhood. He had but one flaw in his personality: loyalty and honesty when it came to dealing with his friends, and, like everyone else, he was Clark's friend.

There might not have really been dollar signs instead of pupils in Kogan's eyes as they sat in a popular student hang-out, but Clark was sure he could see them.

"Publicity," Kogan said. "A demonstration. First we get you known, get your talent proved, *then* go for the big bucks: the TV shows, maybe you get paid for being experimented on, who knows?"

Clark frowned. "I want to *do* something with this, not just be a media freak."

"Do what? Call the world leaders into one room and make them all like each other? Go to accident sites and telekin-
ness overturned cars right side up? The only thing you can *do* with this is eat as much money through publicity as you can!"

"Yeah . . . okay. What do we do?"

Stewart Kogan smiled his biggest wolf-in-sheep's-clothing smile. "Leave it to me."

Clark didn't know how Kogan managed it. He overheard phone calls in which Kogan

represented himself as a "Professor von Mullerr frrom Hei-delberrg" and as a network executive and as a dozen other things. He piled scam upon scam upon fraud and managed to leave the shark tank at the local aquarium without laying out a penny. He got all the local TV network affiliates to send camera crews: since Professor von Muller had won the 1979 and 1981 (albeit totally fictitious) Europea Prize for Psychology, a prize which all and sundry were informed by a senator's aide made the Nobel look like a toy in a Cracker Jack box, it was *Muller* who attracted the attention, von Muller and his amazing discovery, the Student Who Could Survive in a Shark Tank.

Clark had rebelled against the idea, but Kogan, using the logic and reason of the deceitful, which sounds purer and clearer than a Sunday sermon, convinced him that this was the only way to cash in.

"You can't possibly be killed," Kogan told him. "You know why? Because when you jump into that tank you're going to be terrified. Remember the incident with the dog? You're

going to scare the shark silly, and then you just hang out for a minute or two. Simple."

The logic was inescapable, and so was his position, perched on a board overhanging a large tank, while a sixteen-foot Great White shark thrashed angrily right beneath him, back and forth, back and forth.

Clark's heart pounded and he felt faint. God, he thought, am I scared! I'm going to be killed. I'm going to die. No, no I'm not. The shark is going to be scared, and won't come near me. He'll pick up my fear and feel it himself. He'll climb the walls trying to escape. He won't come near me. I'm safe. I have the power to control others. I'll be all right. The shark won't come near me. Just spend a minute in the water. Just a minute. He won't come near me. I'm going to be safe. I'm going to be okay.

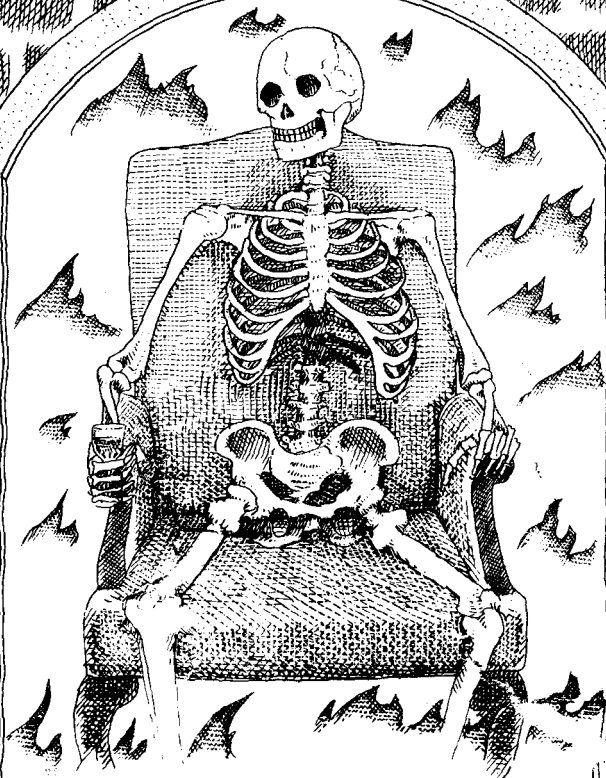
With that, he threw a smile onto his face, raised his right arm, and plunged into the water.

He wasn't afraid.

And neither, therefore, was the shark.

They buried the head and the left foot from the ankle down, which was all that was left.

FICTION



THE SMILE

by J. R. Petri

Illustration by Glenn Wolff

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THERE'S MURDER, OF COURSE...

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It was pretty much agreed afterward among the members that if it hadn't been for Disdaine, the Ravens Five might never have gotten its very own skeleton in the first place. For, as Swan said himself, "Disdaine, not me, gets the credit for it, first to last."

Still, they might have thought Swan was something overmodest in saying this, for it was he, as they all very well knew, who first went out and got the thing and fetched it home.

"For the realism," as he told them.

They listened to Swan, paid attention when he spoke; but it wasn't always so. In fact, Swan wasn't even a member a few months before, just a kind of observer.

He sat excluded in a corner of the living room while the Ravens Five raved and recited over their latest dogeared crime novel (brilliant author—a real *find*), leaving rings of tea and Swan's best sherry on the furniture, and shedding crumbs of Mrs. Swan's coffin-shaped sugar cookies over the carpet.

In his corner Swan sat, a passionless man, all were convinced, a doer, a worker, a bustling insect person, bereft of imagination and true romantic feeling. Not Ravens Five material at all. "No membership," said Disdaine, "for Swan."

For although Mrs. Swan was the club treasurer and, along with President Disdaine, a founding member, the connection was not enough, Disdaine insisted, to overcome one major objection to Swan's admittance: Swan had never read a book completely through, cover to cover, in his entire life.

Couldn't manage it.

Even with a newspaper, he could not bring himself to leave the island safety of the rock-black headlines and cast himself into the sea of fine print below. He couldn't swim it, his breathing wasn't right.

"Anyway," he admitted, "I'd rather be out doing things than reading."

The members shuddered.

Disdaine said, leering from his seat so close to Mrs. Swan, "You're always *doing* things, Swan. Trouble is, you don't *finish* things."

Mrs. Swan's tinkling voice was the first to laugh, and rang loudest, high up above the others like a wind chime just out of reach.

Swan cringed. There were nights he didn't finish things.

"Now then," called President Disdaine, clapping his death-white, long-boned hands for attention and thumping the book that lay before them, "down to business."

Swan retreated into his corner and into himself, jaws arc-welded shut, lips riveted together, vanishing from their world, gone. Like the man in a movie he had once seen who shrank away to nothing at all, nonexistence, as good as dead to all who knew him.

But he watched. And he listened. They couldn't deny him that, not in his own house.

Mrs. De Forest, blinking through enormous spectacle lenses like two magnifying glasses, hoping to slide in a word on the subject of strangulations; Davis, sucking at his too-large meerschaum pipe and hammering a sudden fist into a palm to show how a skull might be caved in "like an egg! just like an egg!" And fat Mr. Warkentein, a lover of stab wounds, drinking tea "because the demon alcohol breeds wickedness!"

And there, his own Mrs. Swan, so very agreeable, siding with any two arguments at once, but in the end deferring to Disdaine, who painted opinions grandly on the air with bold strokes of his long white hands, hands that scarcely paused in their swooping flights except to fall from time to time like settling moths upon the arm of Mrs. Swan.

Whenever Disdaine's knee pressed against Mrs. Swan's leg, it felt to Swan as if a steel blade were being driven into his own flesh.

And yet, what could he say or do?

"You're a failure," Mrs. Swan told him tirelessly. And she was right.

In his wake, so many failures, like dead and dying bodies falling behind a rudderless ship. Jobs. Friendships. And because he did possess a keen mind in spite of it all, like a fine Swiss movement, polished and electric, at the heart of a bomb that would not explode, Swan had known for some time that his marriage was failing, too.

There had been no great ground-splitting overnight rift between him and Mrs. Swan. It was impossible to say when it had started. But with the same inexorable slowness by which it wore down mountains, time had come between them, drifted them apart like continents, Swan glancing back but seeing no one familiar on the far retreating shore. Too much time.

Too much boredom.

Once she had given him books, crime novels, to read. But he had started a dozen and never finished one. After the first chapter, always it was like pushing knee-deep through the ink; exhaustion got him, finished him.

So now there was the club, and Swan in his corner, envying. He

wanted to be a member, a part of things with Mrs. Swan. Perhaps he was sorriest of all when a meeting had to end. When the members left, the sparkle in Mrs. Swan's eyes went with them.

Disdaine's voice brought Swan back to the present. "Well, so much for that one."

The crime novel of the week lay discarded on the table, finished. As they always did, they had pulled it apart like some luckless, startled fly, dismembered it leg by leg by leg, wing by shivering wing, then put it back together again by committee until Disdaine saw that it was good—and adjourned.

The sherry bottle was empty.

The members lounged about a few more minutes, having a comfortable and easy chatter. Swan watched them as if through a telescope. He envied them their kinship. Especially, he marveled at the depth of grisly knowledge held by these gentle people.

He saw them to the door with genuine reluctance (good heavens, can that really be the time?), found their hats for them, helped them heavily into their coats, and saw them all off.

With the exception of Disdaine.

Swan retired discreetly to bed, leaving Mrs. Swan and the lingering Disdaine to talk, two old and very dear friends, the founding members.

Although he really wasn't so very trusting a man.

Sunlight on the bedroom wall.
Monday morning.

Swan woke to an empty suite, Mrs. Swan, up at six, having showered, eaten her single slice of bone-dry scaling toast under the ticking kitchen clock, dressed, and streetcarred off to her job at the flower shop. All that marked her passing were a few drops of water on the shower curtain and the faint sad scent of her lilac perfume in the air.

One of these days, Swan thought, she won't be back.

The coffee was cold on the sideboard. He made a fresh pot. He gathered up the scattered morning paper, refolded it neatly, set it back on the table, headlines up and waiting.

He could not bring himself to read even the headlines today. He stared out through the window into the frosting blue-sky morning where two trees he admired framed the view, trees he had decided were an oak and an ash, now wearing patchwork autumn yellows and sprinkling leaves against the glass. Soon, he thought, they'll

have lost their leaves entirely. And with a start, as though an icy hand had touched him, Swan realized the brooding nearness of winter. It brought him an uneasy sense of urgency.

Mrs. Swan was going to leave him. Soon. With Disdaine.

"And I'm just sitting here waiting," he said aloud.

Mrs. Swan had left next week's book on the table—*Murder Is Easy*. He picked it up, opened it, fanned the pages, closed it hard. No use. He wasn't a good reader. He was a doer.

"Well then, do something!"

There was the club. If only they'd allow him to join, maybe he and Mrs. Swan would have something in common again, something to share, something to talk about in the evenings. But how to convince the members?

He could do something for them. That was it.

He could go out and find them something interesting—no, shocking! Something that would lift them up out of their parlor chairs and slap the library dust out of them. Stories, novels, poems, plays: all words and words. He'd go out and stalk the back streets and bottomless haunts, places the members mouthed about but dared not go, and bag for them some raw chunk of criminality they could pass around and thump down on the table till the polished wood-grain cracked. They'd realize then, Mrs. Swan would realize, what an important part of things he could be, the hands of the Ravens Five, whirring silent, clockwork-steady, sitting in on Sunday, sitting in on Sunday. . . .

Sudden thoughts flowed warmth through Swan like liquor. How Mrs. De Forest's eyeglasses would flash. How Disdaine would shrivel away. And Mrs. Swan there to see it all. Wonderful.

The elevator dropped him down to the street.

He began walking north.

As he went, the city aged. It was as though the town-hall clock had reversed itself, begun beating the other way, its time machinery carrying him back at the rate of twenty years to a city block. Behind him the tall, younger buildings subsided in a group. Ahead, the old buildings hunkered down, scarred and soiled brick under dull onionskin paint, buildings that had seen things.

Dead leaves blew circles in the street.

He had turned into a long, brick-lined trench of a street where shadowed alleyways opened up at intervals like carious mouths,

hungry, patient. There were hooded windows high up and black iron firestairs spidering down. A mongrel dog challenged him over something raw.

"Murderers dwell here," Swan muttered, "or ought to."

He might have walked right on past the shop if something hadn't made him look twice.

It was a cast-aside place at the end of a mews, easily missed, a grime-blackened low front of brick, hard up against the road and out of the sun. Abreast of its dust-smutted window, Swan stopped, curious, to squint through the glass.

What did he expect? Perhaps an old thumb-worn pistol with notched barrel and silencer; or brass knuckles with spikes and dark secret stains; maybe switchblade knives that had seen duty.

In fact, giving up its shadows as Swan's eyes adjusted, the window revealed only a mad jumble of used household bric-a-brac: a tall, spangled lamp; a wall clock shaped like a star; a wine rack; some funereal brass oddments; a long row of tea cosies. Disappointed, Swan drew back; but his eye was caught then and held by a gleam of white back deep in the dark that looked like . . .

And Swan realized what it was. "Yes," he breathed.

It was real—better than real. It was something that stopped his heart slam dead in his chest, then started it up again in the wrong gear. Something that brought Alfred Hitchcock alive in his knees and stomach and sent something glinty-eyed stealing through his veins.

A human skeleton.

At the back of the shop, only just visible in the skelter of turvey junk, it grinned back at Swan with a fine set of teeth and no eyes.

Swan went in, breathing.

The shopman owned a long, watchful, canine sort of face, and stood looking pleasant by the counter, and welcoming. He followed Swan's gaze to the skeleton and said in a stalking voice:

"Good item, sir. Much in demand. Medical students, you know . . ."

"Is—is it real?"

"Real? better than real. Plastic, maybe. Last a lifetime—ha, ha. And so cheap—thirty dollars."

"Plastic?"

The shopman reconsidered. "It might be real. A student brought it."

The skeleton sprawled among the pawned and sold-off items with an air of enormous patience, as if it were awaiting the return of

its original owner, who would then, with his ticket, reclaim it. All around, mounded up in a vast confusion, were the tumbled castoff belongings of men and women. Swan had the feeling he was at the scene of a colossal train wreck from which all except one had escaped with their lives.

They stood among the clutter inspecting the skeleton, weighing it in their minds on different scales. Swan wanted it to be real. "It's yellowing a bit," he said.

"Oh, real bones will do that, oh, they will." The shopman spoke with authority. He might have been an anatomist who had come for the day to run the shop for a sick aunt.

Swan had already bought the skeleton in his thoughts, had already fetched it halfway home. Aloud he said, "What keeps it together?"

"Well, for your convenience, it's all wired, sir. Look—"

Like some sly old dusty Stromboli, the shopman held the skeleton up, dangling, a white marionette waiting for the music to start.

"Throw in an old suitcase," tempted the shopman, reading Swan's thoughts, "good for carrying, storage, and keeping people's noses poked somewhere else like they ought to be, and for keeping the rain off. Package deal. Cash sale. Thirty dollars."

Swan paid.

The skeleton grinned like a boy as the shopman accorded it into the suitcase, lock-snapped it in with the two big brass rattrap catches. Swan hugged the rattling load home with him and shoved it pridefully under the bed.

Days passed waiting for Sunday, anxious days.

Swan found himself thinking more and more about bones.

In the bathroom mirror, seeing reflected his own collarbone, his own cocked finger, his brow high—too high—and wide over sculpted cheekbones, he wondered and wandered his hand over them.

"That's me in there, the real me, hiding."

He thought about skeletons.

Bones long and socketed, holding the flesh up into the wind like tentpoles. Bones inside everyone, hidden and secretly working.

"Are you going to spend forever in that washroom?"

And Mrs. Swan, he watched her, too, sour-pouting and moving

about the apartment on her bones, silently, her flesh muscles lifting her skeleton now this way, now that. At her elbows, knees, heels, chin, the bone-ends nudging out as though they might one day break free and escape.

On Tuesday they had chops; Swan studied the bones. On Thursday, chicken, and Swan sat over the remains of his meal a long time, thinking. Mrs. Swan let out very loud sighs and crashed things in the kitchen.

Sunday.

Mrs. Swan rapping up the steps of the church on her best flint-hard heels, Swan three strides behind. Mrs. Swan not relaxing until they reached their pew and from across the aisle Disdaine unwound her with his eyes and mellowed her down, Swan glancing quickly away.

They began the first hymn, and for once Swan did not remain comatose between eyeblinks like a lizard on a rock. He looked at Disdaine and at the congregation. All these people, all these bones, Disdaine leading them, it seemed. An army of bones creaking up for a hymn, and down for a prayer. Skeletons, every one like every other, caught in a ponderous choreography of sameness, enslaved by their flesh. Creaking up, creaking down. Up. Down . . .

I Know Not What the Future Hath, they sang.

Disdaine went up to read the lesson, and standing over them he was wonderful, flinging his armbones, handbones, fingerbones out and in, out and in, like a baby pterodactyl learning to fly.

Hymns, prayers, collection, hymns, prayers.

Then they were leaving, Mrs. Swan and Disdaine whispering and smiling at the foot of the steps while Swan shook the pastor's hand, feeling the bones move under the skin like sticks. "I'll be right home," called out Mrs. Swan with too much conviction, pushing Swan away with her eyes from behind Disdaine's black-wool body. Swan legged it home alone, making his skeleton work, and the only things he noticed along the way were a tramp with a torn umbrella, and his two trees losing their leaves in long empty rents through which their branches showed.

Lunch. Soup and a sandwich. Silence.

She must come home, he thought, all her things are here. And the door rattled open and there she was, throwing her keys down onto the counter like a handful of ice and moving her hips on through the room.

"I'll warm you some soup . . ." Swan called after her. The bath-

room door closed between them like a barricade.

A whisper of leaves sifted against the window.

Zero hour, the hour of the members, the hour of show and tell was near. A sudden panic gripped him. How would he manage it? He blushed at the thought of dragging his prize and his pride out into the room without good reason, like a child pressing a favorite toy on the attentions of gathered bored uncles and lip-biting aunts.

The first ring at the door made Swan jump, and it brought Mrs. Swan out of hiding. Disdaine rustled in, white-cheeked and gaunt, blowing on his hands and peering about for Mrs. Swan as if he hadn't seen her in weeks. Swan admired his skeleton, helping him out of his coat.

The others then came in a rush, letting October into the room with them, shaking the cold out of their gloves. Swan had already scurried to his seat in the corner before they disentangled and broke out of the front hall. Dear God, thought Swan, bring me an opening.

He watched the members move, looking into them for their bones. Mr. Warkentein was a problem, having so successfully buried his skeleton under flesh. None of it protruded, excepting his little white teeth, with which he ate the coffin cookies steadily. It was as though he were determined to build up even more of a mound over his bones to keep them safe, like spading too much earth over a grave.

The Ravens Five settled in.

They talked of bodies.

Bodies poisoned, strangled, beaten, burned. Bodies stabbed, bodies shot, bodies drugged. Bodies thrown over precipices, under trains, into swamps, out of airplanes. Bodies collided, squeezed, stretched, shaken, or treated to heart-stopping fright. Bodies, bodies, thought Swan, all meat.

What about the bones?

Time stole by like a thief. Swan caught himself crushing his watch under his thumb to slow it down.

An opening, pleaded Swan, an opening, please, please, heaven . . .

Then, miraculously, there it was, his chance, coming up on him in a rush and sweeping by so fast he had to jump and shout to catch it.

"—fractured his skull," finished Disdaine.

"Like an egg," added Davis.

Swan leaped.

"Speaking of skulls . . ."

The water-babble of voices stopped as suddenly as though some unseen hand had turned a valve.

"I wonder," said Swan bravely, "if we all appreciate just how difficult it would really be to break a human skull?"

Like searchlights probing an incoming enemy, the members turned their stares on Swan. Mrs. Swan's eyes nearly drew blood.

"A skull," Swan pursued doggedly, "is really quite strong."

Ten beaoning eyes scanned him, unblinking. Four seconds, five . . .

Then, like the first hairline crack in a yielding chrysalis, the armor plate fissured: Davis, slowly raising his hand and hesitantly kneading the top of his head, puzzled.

"It *seems* fragile to me." Davis raised an eyebrow at his neighbor, fat Mr. Warkentein, who reluctantly, as if it were a duty, pressed pink sausage fingers against his own glistening pate and frowned.

Swan feathered out his breath, relaxing. They were all doing it now, nudging, probing, and tap-tapping the tops of their heads. Only Disdaine continued to glare. And Mrs. Swan.

"Hard," pronounced Mrs. De Forest.

"Brittle," said Davis.

Mr. Warkentein, never quick to commit himself, sausaged away at his own head, frowning.

Disdaine's eyes machine-gunned the room.

Swan was elated. He bounded into the bedroom; with another bound he reappeared.

"Look!"

He thrust under Mrs. De Forest's face something large, pale, spidery, dried up, a thing of tombs and graveyard nightmares. Mrs. De Forest screamed as though the roof of her stomach had collapsed.

A start of horror broke from every throat. Every face paled as the blood ran out of it. Only Disdaine found words:

"Swan! What in God's name . . . ?"

Swan stood blinking, dazed at the reaction. He had not expected this. Surprise, interest, of course, even Disdaine's cold indifference. But not this—this thunderclap of terror. And not from the members of the Ravens Five, to whom no aspect of the macabre was unfamiliar, people who ate murder for breakfast. Surely nothing of this sort could frighten them?

Mrs. De Forest was making little pigeon sounds and dabbing at her eyes, feeling for the heavy glasses lost in her lap. The others just sat, rigid, like plaster saints.

It was Davis who grew bold first. He leaned a tiny bit forward in his chair. "What is it?" He wrinkled his nose.

Swan faced him. "Just a skeleton . . ." The collection of bones hung loose from his hand behind him.

"I know that. Can I see?"

Swan hesitated.

"Come on, Swan, let's see the bloody thing," demanded Mr. Warkentein. "Might as well, eh? after all the damn fuss."

Shyly, bracing himself for another explosion, Swan brought the skeleton forward into the light and held it up to them.

There was a long silence punctuated by a sharp snort from Disdaine's corner. But Swan felt a new hope, a thaw, come to him on the air.

"Is it real?" Davis asked.

Then the tension broke all of a sudden like a gate, questions and comments surged and spilled in the room.

"It's so light . . ."

"See how the arm bends . . ."

"And look at the jaw . . ."

"And the teeth . . ."

Swan relaxed, letting apprehension slide out of him in a long rush of air. It was going to be all right. They were poring over the skeleton now, feeling and exclaiming. But where was Mrs. Swan?

Disdaine was aloof, sulking on the couch, his eyes small and hard, the tip of his cigarette a third eye of angry red. And Mrs. Swan was still seated next to him, looking as though she had been slapped. How much alike they look, thought Swan; like a pair done in ceramics, ready for the kiln.

Mr. Warkentein was pulling at Swan's arm. "Fantastic thing, terrific! Don't know where you ever found it."

"Thanks." Swan looked again at Mrs. Swan, wanting her by him.

But she was with Disdaine, hard as porcelain.

The rest of the meeting revolved around the skeleton. Everyone wanted to hold it, to handle it. Mrs. De Forest, now fully recovered, summed it up for all of them: "I mean, you talk, you *read* about a thing for years, never actually *see* it, and suddenly *there* it is!"

Swan avoided looking again in Mrs. Swan's direction, he couldn't stand not seeing appreciation in her eyes. She was gone, that was all. Just as surely as if she had taken a train, she was gone, traveling with Disdaine in strange territory, plotting with Disdaine to spoil this new chance for Swan. He could almost hear their two

minds working across the ten thousand miles of living room carpet, trying to think up a way to do it.

The evening passed.

Mrs. De Forest recovered so well she even told Swan of a method for bleaching the white back into the bones: "A little vinegar, dear, and baking soda . . ."

Then everyone was gone and only Disdaine remained, sitting just as he had all evening, in an angry cloud of cigarette smoke with his knee, that groping knee, against Mrs. Swan. They watched Swan fold his skeleton away like some ancient, delicate musical instrument.

In bed, Swan lay with his hands crossed over his breast and heard their voices cutting hard in the living room, their quick razoring laughs.

He was still wide awake when the apartment door closed and the lock snapped Disdaine out, and he waited with his stomach clenching like a fist, listening, until he heard Mrs. Swan move in the hall.

She hasn't left me yet, he thought, not yet.

Mrs. Swan came to bed. They lay together in the darkness, inches apart, facing upward with their silences pulled over them, speaking to each other only in voiceless shallow breaths that came and went, came and went, and would not keep in time.

Inches below, the skeleton lay staring upward too, smiling.

The Sundays arrived now for Swan with the measured excitement of birthday parties.

Swan and the skeleton. The skeleton and Swan. They were lionized by the members like some Hollywood crime feature duo. Everyone wanted to talk to Swan, and did. Everyone wanted to talk to the skeleton, but couldn't, and so talked to Swan instead.

Meanwhile, Disdaine smoked four hundred cigarettes, drank one hundred glasses of sherry, and never once said thanks or a civil word to anyone. He and Mrs. Swan sat apart with their heads together, looking very high above it all, exchanging looks with one another, and grim little smiles.

And one Sunday, Davis brought up the subject of Swan's becoming a member.

Disdaine rose, looking fierce, lifted a finger at the room, opened his mouth, said nothing, and left.

Mrs. Swan fled to the bedroom and stayed there.

When, the following afternoon, Swan let himself into the apartment with a bag of groceries, he knew right away that something was wrong.

There was no telltale sign to warn him, of the kind the Ravens Five always talked about: no smoldering, abandoned cigarette, no picture slightly out of plumb on the wall, no half-opened window with a breeze inhaling, exhaling the draperies. None of that. Just a tiny hollow somewhere in the suite where something had been, a tiny hollow that pricked the little hairs up on the back of Swan's neck and held them.

Mrs. Swan was there, looking away and pulling at her nails. And there was a flush on her cheeks.

Then Swan knew.

"No."

He dropped the groceries onto the table and headed for the bedroom.

"No!"

Swan fell to his knees and threw up the bed skirt; and with a pressure building around his chest and a fire of needles burning under his skin, his fingers reaching, grasping, closed on nothing. No suitcase. Nothing.

Swan heard himself groan like an animal. Behind him, in the doorway, Mrs. Swan laughed. He turned on her, hands swelling up into fists.

"Where is it? What have you done with it?"

"Gone." She tinkled with wind chime laughter.

Swan felt dazed, without breath. It was as though he had been dropped into freezing water, pulled out, shaken, and tossed back in again. His pulse pounded the blood through his veins. He took a step forward and lifted his hands.

Mrs. Swan covered her mouth in mock fear.

"Oh, my. You wouldn't strike *me*, would you? Well, go ahead! I don't care if you do. You never finish anything you start anyway."

"You gave that skeleton to Disdaine, that's what you did!"

"No, really I didn't." More laughter. "He just took it. He said he was going to burn it. And good riddance."

Swan brushed her aside.

He forced himself along the passageway to the telephone table, fumbled the directory open and found the entry in Mrs. Swan's flowery hand. Halfway out the door he stopped, came back and tore out the telephone cord. He shouted over Mrs. Swan's laughing:

"I just better get there before he does anything. That's all. I just better—"

Disdaine picked up the last of Swan's skeleton, the skull, and clucked his tongue. "'Alas for you, poor Yorick. Where be your gibes now?'"

He threw the skull after the rest of the bones, in through the furnace door, and saw with satisfaction how the flames whumped up into a fiery heat and the sparks whirled. He held out his palms and flinched with delight at the roaring blaze. Two flames blossomed in a fury from the eyeholes of the skull as it settled into the firebed, grinning.

Disdaine watched, not minding, grinning back.

"Burn," he muttered, "burn, my grisly white friend. How abhorred in my imagination you are. My gorge rises to you. Up, up you go, atomized smoke and hellfire dust, up the chimney to ride the next wind out of town, to settle on a thousand graveyards after cheating only one. And with you goes an undeserved membership for Swan, the *real* jester, a man who wouldn't recognize a crime if he fell over an open grave at a picnic. . . . Burn. Not one now, to mock your grinning. . . ."

There was a movement, black on black, near the bottom of the cellar stairs. Disdaine half turned, tightening. A voice, a familiar voice, said, "I hope you didn't burn the suitcase, too. I think I might need it. . . ."

And Swan—it *was* Swan—stepped into the guttering light with a shovel held high. And Disdaine thought for a small eternity how queer it was not to see the blow fall before an explosion of painless but sickening color and stereophonic sound erupted in his head and the floor came rocketing up at him but . . . never . . . quite . . . reached him.

The skeleton burned.

It burned, still looking out of the furnace door, laughing gouts of flame and slowly crumbling, settling in the embers and the ash.

Like some ghastly Cheshire cat, its smile was the last thing to go.

"They're here," Swan said to Mrs. Swan. She didn't look up, busy with her cookies.

"I'll go," said Swan.

It was the members at the door, all come at once.

Mrs. De Forest, polishing winter out of her glasses; fat Mr. War-kentein, breathing hard through petulant lips; Davis, pipe dead between his teeth and leaning eagerly out of his coat.

"Well, Swanny," cried Davis, "today's the day, huh?"

Swan blushed and passed Davis a hanger. Swanny—he liked that. It had a friendly, warm, nice sort of weight to it. He led the members into the living room, beaming.

Mrs. Swan was waiting for them, had the cookies, the tea, the sherry all out and ready. Swan was pleased. He had dusted and cleaned the room himself.

Davis chafed his hands together, then suddenly crowed:

"Mrs. Swan! Oh, now you've outdone yourself. Look, everyone! Look at the cookies!"

"Skulls!" cried Mrs. De Forest. "How lovely!"

"My idea," said Swan.

They all sat, Swan going to his old corner.

"No, Swanny, not there." Davis beckoned. "Here at the table with the rest of us." He laughed. "Can't swear you in at long distance, can we?" He held up his hands. "And now—"

He waited until he had their attention, then with a grand gesture, as though he were a conjurer, produced the club treasure from an inside pocket. "Here it is, Swanny," he cried. "Our bible. Our very own leather-bound, first edition of Poe!"

He opened the book randomly, for the oath. They all ducked forward to see, like toy drinking birds.

"Oh!" cried Davis. "This is appropriate—look!" He read the title out to them: "*The Man That Was Used Up*."

"Now, Swanny, place your right hand over this book and repeat after me . . ."

It was done in a moment. Swan fell back in the chair, suffused with happiness, a full-fledged member of the Ravens Five. Dedication had paid off. And besides, as Davis had pointed out to the members, it would have been a shame after Disdaine's desertion to have had to change the club name. . . .

Davis was cracking his knuckles on the table.

"Two more items. First, we must elect a new president—"

Davis was elected by acclamation.

"Second, we need a name for our new mascot, generously donated by brother Swanny."

Eyes swiveled to view the skeleton. It was slumped in a chair, head back against the wall, thin, gleaming, smiling approval.

"Oh, Mr. Swan," cried Mrs. De Forest, "I see the baking soda worked."

"Suggestions?" prompted Davis.

The clock ticked in the kitchen. They all stared in different directions.

"Well, I have an idea," Swan put in finally.

"Yes, Swanny?"

"I was thinking that—I mean, I know he left without a word, and all, but—in view of his past services to the club, as a sort of honor, why not call the skeleton—I mean, *ours* skeleton—Disdaine?"

Davis hooted.

"Terrific! Great! Sort of looks like him, too, doesn't it? Kind of long and dry. And I'll tell you what—"

Davis reached out and brought the skeleton rattling over the table top to fetch up in Disdaine's old spot at the end of the couch.

"To good old Disdaine!" Davis raised his glass.

"Disdaine!" they echoed.

And from where he sat, Swan could see the skeleton settling comfortably into the cushions, like a bird, some bizarre sort of stork, come home to its nest, smiling, smiling, a knee pressing into the thigh of Mrs. Swan.

Swan looked over into Mrs. Swan's vacant eyes, raised his glass, and smiled too.

The Simplest Thing in the World

by Thomasina Weber



By draping the body over the wooden bridge railing, George Carson was able to grasp her ankles and heave her the rest of the way, smiling as he heard the splash when Agnes hit the water six feet below. The river was swollen from the recent rains and it would not take any time at all for the current to carry her far away and, he hoped, out to sea.

In the bright moonlight he began the climb up the road to his house. Life was going to be

much more pleasant without Agnes around to nag him. He had managed to endure it for twenty-five years, but each year it was harder to do. Tonight had been the last straw, topping the load of straws that had been piled on him all through the day.

First, he had run out of penicillin and was told it would be two hours before he could get any. Then Mrs. McCarthy had come in to get her prescription refilled and he had had to listen to the latest medical report on

Illustration by George Thompson

every member of her family, most of whom he did not even know, and all of whom were living in different states.

"You aren't looking at all well today," she told him. "You really must get more rest, Mr. Carson."

"I feel fine, Mrs. McCarthy."

"Heart attacks can come quite unexpectedly, you know. I had a friend once who never *dreamed*—"

"I feel fine, Mrs. McCarthy."

George sometimes wished he had not made such an effort to live up to his slogan, *The Friendly Corner Druggist*. Being friendly could be exhausting.

He had been weary when he got home and not in the mood for Agnes, who had decided that tonight was the night to discuss closing in the porch to make another room. He had walked out of the kitchen, but she had followed him. Even when he locked himself in the bathroom, she talked through the door. When he came out she was still yattering at him and yattering and yattering and yattering—

George Carson resented being classified as middle-aged. He was more active now than he had been as a youth. As a young man he had had frequent lazy spells, periods when he could not have cared less about a career or success or the future. Then he had met Agnes, who was forceful and attractive, and

after they were married he settled down.

He had to give her credit for that, he thought as he walked back through the moonlight toward their house—his house now. She had motivated him and steered him into the success pattern. Because of her, he was established in town as the owner of two drugstores, with negotiations in progress for the purchase of two others in the next town.

Everything has its limits, though, and Agnes had overstepped hers. Motivation and encouragement can quite easily develop into nagging. George no longer needed to be prodded, and every prod Agnes gave him reinforced his desire to get rid of her.

He allowed himself the luxury of a laugh as he entered the sumptuous living room. All those stories he had read about the difficulties of killing someone were ridiculous. Those writers probably thought they were helping the cause of justice by making a potential murderer afraid of failure and thereby changing his mind about committing one. Well, George Carson knew the truth now! It was the simplest thing in the world to kill a person.

Of course, everyone might not be as obliging as Agnes had been, turning her back so that he could crown her with the

heavy paperweight, but that was because she was so sure of herself and sure of George. She thought she knew him inside out. George laughed again as he went into the kitchen to make coffee. How wonderful it was to be alone at last.

"Hello, Georgie."

George dropped the coffee canister. He turned to see Connie Blake standing at the back door.

"You seem nervous tonight, Georgie. Agnes been giving you a hard time?"

Connie always made him nervous; she was so openly flirtatious. He hoped no one would get the wrong idea. "You startled me, that's all," he said. "I didn't see any lights next door and I thought you were out."

"I was." She opened the screen door and came in. "I was walking along the river."

George was glad he had dropped the canister because sweeping up the coffee gave him an excuse to bend over and conceal his shock at her announcement. If the moonlight had been bright enough for him to see by, it had been bright enough for someone else to see by.

"Will you have some coffee?" he asked. "I have another can in the cupboard."

"Sounds good."

He purposely avoided her eyes as he prepared the coffee. She

and Agnes had been cordial when they met, but there was no love lost between them. Connie was stunningly beautiful and Agnes was not, and that in itself would be enough to discourage a friendly relationship. In addition, Agnes thought Connie was trying to seduce George, which just proved how unreasonable Agnes was. George stood five foot eight and weighed one hundred and sixty pounds and wore thick glasses and had thin blond hair spread carefully over a distressingly pink scalp. Connie's husband, on the other hand, had a football star's physique, perfect white teeth, and an engaging smile. He was less successful than George—he was a car salesman—but his personality gave the impression that he was more so. He commanded respect wherever he went, and there wasn't anyone who did not like him.

"Where's Richard?" asked George, hoping he would not come looking for his wife and find her alone here with George.

"He stayed late in town." Connie smiled and George read knowledge in her smile, as if she shared a secret with him. His hand shook as he poured the coffee.

"Agnes is—has gone. To bed."

"Yes," said Connie, still smiling.

"She—uh—had a headache."

"I don't wonder."

"What do you mean, Connie?"

Her eyes widened. "Why nothing, George, except that Agnes often has headaches. She worries about you."

"I'm not a child!"

"Behind every successful man is a woman."

"Nagging him to death!"

"Don't you know that money keeps a woman quiet?" She extended her cup for a refill. "Anyway, Agnes always had your best interests at heart."

George caught her use of the past tense, and he was sure her mention of money had nothing to do with Agnes. Connie had seen what happened to Agnes and now she was going to blackmail him. George's feelings at the moment were a mixture of panic and sorrow. Connie was such a beautiful woman.

Connie weighed less than Agnes, and it was easier to drop her off the bridge. While he had felt satisfaction as he dumped his wife, he felt regret over Connie. Self-preservation came first, though, and regret had to be ignored. Being a druggist had its advantages. As soon as he realized Connie had witnessed his crime, he excused himself and went into the bathroom where he kept an assortment of pills and drugs. Returning to the kitchen,

he suggested they kill the pot, admiring his macabre flash of wit, and dosed her third cup. It knocked her out and he was able to carry her to the bridge, relegating the completion of the job to the swift current that had been waiting for Agnes.

He was halfway back to his house when the headlights swung across him, pinning him to the spot. After the first start of terror, he realized they belonged to the Blakes' car, which had just turned into its driveway. A door slammed and footsteps came toward him.

"What do you say, George old boy?"

George was thankful for the distance between them which saved him from the usual paralyzing slap on the back. "Evening, Richard."

"Out for a walk?"

"Yes. I got a little stuffy inside."

"Where's Connie?"

George looked at him in surprise. "What makes you think I know where your wife is?"

"Don't get excited, old boy," said Richard, laughing. "Our house is dark. I thought she might be with Agnes."

Richard could laugh if he liked, but that did not change the oddity of his remark. It was just possible that he had arrived some time before his headlights proclaimed, especially if he wanted to arrive un-

announced in order to check up on his wife.

"Since everything's dead at my house, George, I'll accept your invitation for a nightcap."

"I'm rather tired, Richard."

"Then a relaxing drink with a friend will make you sleep."

"Maybe some other time—" But they were already in George's kitchen.

George felt a swift dismay when he saw the two cups on the table, but it passed quickly. Richard would assume the drinkers had been George and Agnes, of course.

He and Richard saw the lipstick stain at the same time. "I thought Agnes never wore makeup," said Richard quietly.

"She doesn't. That is, not usually. She put some on tonight. Just for fun."

"Agnes never was one for fun," said Richard.

"Well, you know how women are. You can't figure them out."

Richard did not answer. He was picking something up off the floor. George's mind blotted out all sound, all sight except the small handkerchief with Connie's initials embroidered on the corner. Gradually sight came back and George could see the hand that held the handkerchief, the sportjacket sleeve leading upward to the massive shoulder.

Richard could have been a statue, as still as he stood, star-

ing down at the square of linen in his hand. "I've suspected about you and Connie for some time," he said absently, as if he were making polite conversation while his mind was engaged in something else. "Ever since Agnes put me wise." Then he lifted his head and his face grew hard. "I thought you were my friend, George, but you're nothing but a rat!"

What was the matter with everyone? Agnes suspecting him, Richard suspecting Connie—it was incredible. George's eyes watched the big man coming toward him, but his hands were pulling a drawer open, fumbling, finding, lifting, driving—then dripping.

George thought he was going to faint as he watched Richard slump to the floor, the paring knife buried to the hilt in his chest. He shook his head to clear it. This absolutely could not be happening. All he had wanted to do was kill his wife and now three people were dead, killed by George Carson, The Friendly Corner Druggist.

He dropped into a chair by the table. Earlier, he had been elated at how easy it had been to kill his wife. It had been easy to kill Connie, too, but not as pleasurable. It had also been easy, surprisingly easy, to kill Richard, big as he was. George had to be honest, though: if Richard had not been dis-

tracted by his wife's apparent infidelity, it would not have been easy at all. Besides, he still had to get Richard down to the bridge and over.

Suddenly George felt exhausted. He wanted to crawl under the table, curl up into a ball, and stay there, seeing nothing, hearing nothing, knowing nothing. Now, now, he told himself, there is a job to be done. After that is completed there will be time to take a bath, relax, and resume the interrupted pattern of your life. All he would have to do was report his wife missing after a walk along the river. The body might never be found, so a fatal accident would be assumed. As for the Blakes, he need do nothing about them. They were only neighbors, and it was not up to him to keep track of their comings and goings. Let someone else report them missing.

He really ought to get up and drag Richard's body out of his kitchen, but the man looked so heavy and George was so tired. Just a few more minutes and then he would go and get the wheelbarrow—

Then Richard moved. George watched in horror as his huge fist clenched and unclenched then, palm down, began to creep across the floor, feeling and groping. It was impossible, of course; Richard was dead. The knife was still in his chest. An

agonized groan made George clap his hands over his ears.

Richard's eyes were closed. Although a dead man could not see, he might be able to hear, so George sat motionless. Then the body tried to gather its feet under it, to get up on its knees. George was paralyzed. If the body grasped him, to take him back with it, he would be utterly unable to resist.

The body was on its feet now, dripping blood, bent over the table, swaying. Slowly it raised its head. George gasped and covered his face with his hands. He could not look into the eyes of a dead man.

Behind him, the kitchen door opened. Blindly, he listened to the dragging footsteps crossing the floor. "Oh, no!" and "My God!" intermingled impossibly. George buried his head in his arms on the table. A nightmare could be banished by opening one's eyes, but George was deadly sure that he would never escape from this nightmare, no matter what he did.

Suddenly strong fingers grasped his hair and pulled his head upright. His eyes flew open with shock. "You slime," said Agnes through puffed lips. "After I gave you the best twenty-five years of my life, you try to kill me! Lucky for you I have a hard head, but the branch I managed to catch hold of didn't do much for my hands!

And lucky for Connie I was recuperating on the riverbank when you launched her."

Still staring, George turned to look at Connie, who was trying to hold her husband up and stop his bleeding. Her blouse was plastered to her body and her slacks were still draining. "I'll make you pay for this if I don't do another thing in this life," she said to George.

The doorbell rang, but no one made a move to answer it. It rang again, and then heavy footsteps approached. Two policemen entered the kitchen. Dumbfounded, they looked from one person to another. Then one of them said, "Better call an ambulance, Jim. This guy's lost a lot of blood."

When Jim had left the room, the other officer said, "What's happened here?"

Agnes, who never seemed to be at a loss for words, answered with a question of her own. "What are you doing here?"

"Mrs. McCarthy phoned us. It seems she noticed the pills she picked up today looked different from the last ones, so she called the house here and got no answer. She told us she had noticed today that Mr. Carson didn't look well, and when nobody answered the phone, she was sure he had had a heart attack."

Jim came into the kitchen and announced that an ambu-

lance was on its way. "Maybe I should have ordered two," he said, his eyes taking in the dripping women.

"Noone has told me what happened," said the other officer.

"It's not as bad as it looks," said Agnes. "Connie—Mrs. Blake—and I went for a walk along the river and I slipped and fell in and when Connie tried to grab me, she fell in, too. We managed to pull ourselves out, and when we reached the house, we found Richard with George. The overhanging branches had scratched us up pretty well and George went to pieces when he saw us. He got a knife to cut off our torn clothing, but he nearly fainted when he got blood on him, so Richard tried to take the knife, but George yelled that he could do it and they struggled for the knife and—well, you can see, Richard got it."

"It was nobody's fault," said Connie. "They were only trying to help us."

"Is that what happened, Mr. Carson?"

George met the officer's eyes. "That's exactly what happened," he said.

The ambulance arrived, but Agnes insisted that she did not need to go to the hospital with Richard and Connie. "George will take care of me," she said softly. "And then, I will take care of George."

THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



A case of vivid writing? We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less), based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, 380 Lexington Avenue, New York, New York 10017.

The winning entry for the April Mysterious Photograph will be found on page 155.

FICTION

THE FOREVER TRIP

by Rob Kantner



Illustration by Jim Odbert

Uncle Dan stared down the length of his sheet-covered body. "So, Benjy, they're gonna take another piece of me."

I knew what he meant. At the end of him, under the crisp white hospital sheet, his right foot showed and his left foot didn't. Diabetes, controlled for years, had gradually gained on him and caused the circulation in his left foot to fail, resulting in gangrene. Twice in the past year they'd had to amputate, removing the foot first and the leg below the knee second.

"Just your gall bladder this time, Uncle," I answered, seating myself in the chair next to his bed.

"Aah." Uncle Dan stared at me coldly with his crisp blue eyes. His face was lined, pale, and wasted, marked indelibly with the gall bladder pain that had kept him in a near-fetal position for the past week in his retirement community bed. He looked every one of his eighty-seven years.

"Listen," I said cheerfully, holding up some envelopes, "I picked up your mail. Want to go through it?"

"You go ahead," Dan said dourly. "Let me know if there's any movie role offers in there or anything."

"Sure," I grinned. I inventoried the mail. Mostly ads, which I tossed. The last item was a six by nine manila envelope. I ripped it open. A small note fell out, clipped to a Baggie which had another envelope inside it. I opened the note and read it to my uncle. "Dan: This just came today. Thought it might be important. Do you believe that crummy post office? Love, Millie."

Uncle Dan looked at the Baggie and then at me, eyes narrow. "Millie! My old landlady. What'd she send?"

The Baggie had one of those printed messages from the post office on it, apologizing for the delay in delivery. I ripped the plastic and took out the note-sized envelope. It was faded, wrinkled, addressed in a scrawl to Uncle Dan at his old apartment on Schaefer. I held it up to him. "Looks really old. Want me to open it?"

"Sure, why not."

I opened the envelope and shook out the note. It was small, written on cheap paper, and short. "Tuesday morning," I read. "Dear Dan, I'm in desperate trouble. If you meant what you said, meet me at the bar tonight. I need you. XXX-000. Lila."

I looked at my uncle. He'd raised himself slightly on his thin elbows, staring hard at me, eyes burning, face pale. He

whispered hoarsely, "Ben. The date. What's the date on the envelope?"

I checked the cancellation and my heart nearly stopped. "1939," I said. "August 16, 1939, afternoon. Postmarked Detroit."

"Forty-five years," Uncle Dan muttered, lips dry.

"Wow." I stood and read over the note and the envelope again. "This is really something, Uncle. Who's Lila?"

The back of his bald head faced me as he stared out the bright window of the Detroit Metro Hospital at the Jeffries Freeway/Farmington Road interchange far below. After a long silence he said without looking at me, "She was special."

I walked around the bed to where I could get a look at his face. "What happened to her?"

"I don't know. She disappeared. I never heard."

My amusement evaporated as the tone of anguish in his voice sank in. I said, "She really *was* special, huh?" He didn't answer. I asked, "What bar was she talking about?"

"Burly Curly's," he answered. "We met there practically every day for weeks ... months."

I wanted to press him further, but decided not to. He was going under the knife in the morning to have his gall blad-

der removed, and he was weak and drained from the pain and in shock from the letter. I went to a grocery sack that sat on the floor next to my chair and took out a red thermos. "Hey, Uncle. I brought some Tom and Jerry."

"Hot?" he asked hopefully, turning to face me.

"Of course." I opened the thermos and poured some into a plastic glass that sat on his tray table. "Egg, milk, sugar, brandy, a tad of salt, just the way you like it."

"Well," Dan said with a wan smile, "just a taste." He took the glass in his thin, veined hand and gulped. I refilled the glass and he gulped again and set the glass down jerkily. Sighing, he lay back on the bed. "Guess I blew it, Ben. She needed me and I didn't show up."

"Well hell," I said, pacing to the window, "how could you know? You didn't get the note."

"Wonder what happened to her?" Uncle Dan whispered. "Wonder where she is?"

"We can find out."

His smile was distant. "You've got cash-paying clients to take care of, Ben, you don't have to do detective work for me. Besides, it's been too many years. I'll never know what happened to her now."

I stepped toward him and fixed him with a stare. "Come on," I said harshly. "You done

survived three years in the air over France, and then the union troubles in the thirties, and you're gonna get out of here, too, and by the time you do I'll have the answer about Lila. Believe it."

His smile did not change. "Of course." He looked at me sharply. "You still flying?"

"Sure, every chance I get, Uncle."

"Be careful. I've read some articles. Those ultralight airplanes are dangerous."

"No worse than the bamboo and wire crates you flew. And I don't have people shooting at me up there."

He waved a wasted hand at me. "Go, take off. I gotta rest up. And take that crap with you."

I picked up the mail. "I'll be back tomorrow to look in on you after they're done." He waved without looking at me, and as I walked out of the hospital room I saw him drink the last of his Tom and Jerry.

I called the hospital the next morning. The operation, scheduled for eight, had been delayed till ten. They told me I could come by and see him in the afternoon. So, with time to kill, I located an old picture of Uncle Dan and drove through the late fall rain to the Detroit Library main branch on Woodward.

The Detroit telephone direc-

tory for 1939 showed a listing for Burly Curly's in the three hundred block of Cass. I drove over there, not expecting much, and wasn't surprised: the block was a devastated shell of burned-out buildings. On the way back to the hospital I stopped at Bullet Realty in Wayne, where Owney Busbee, the owner/broker, was hunched over his cluttered desk; he agreed to run a title search on the Burly Curly's property to try to get a line on the owners.

Back at Greater Detroit Metro Hospital, I found Uncle Dan unconscious in his bed, looking white and shrunken. He sprouted tubes, one conveying, I could tell, oxygen. I sat by the bed watching him for what seemed like the longest time and he did not move. A doctor, who introduced himself as Ahmed Senatkor, stopped by briefly. He told me that the gall bladder operation had gone as expected, but that the post-operation X-rays had revealed a bowel obstruction. He said that they had Uncle Dan on oxygen and fluids and had inserted an abdominal tube to drain the bile that was collecting in his abdominal cavity.

I found a pay phone in the hall and dialed my sister Libby's number. No answer. I dialed my brother Bill and got him. He said he'd be over to the hospital right away. Instead, about fif-

teen minutes later, his wife Marybeth arrived.

She gave me a hug and a kiss on the cheek, sat down in a chair facing Uncle Dan's bed, and got out her knitting. Bill, she told me, hadn't felt up to coming. She said she'd stay with me till visiting hours ended. And so we stayed and watched Dan, who did not regain consciousness. Marybeth knitted and occasionally moistened Uncle Dan's mouth with a damp washcloth, and talked to me. I stared at my uncle and took a few trips down to the smoking room and thought about the forty-five-year-old letter and Lila and the long-gone Burly Curly's bar, till visiting hours ended.

2.

THE BALLOON BUSTER

The morning sunlight drenched Uncle Dan's bed. I stood over him, holding his thin hand. He stared up at me through blue eyes that were crystal-clear no more. "Got two of 'em today, huh, Frank?"

"I sure did, Dan," I answered.

Uncle Dan chuckled. "You got *guts*, Frank. Them balloons are *crawling* with D-7's to protect 'em. And you get past 'em and blow the balloons all to hell anyhow."

I said through a dry mouth,

"Those observation balloons are just too fat and pretty a target to ignore, Dan. And they're valuable to the Jerries. They keep tabs on movements in the trenches from the balloons."

"C'mon, Frank," Dan said, mouth twisted with sarcasm, "you don't go after the balloons because of their military value. Don't kid me. You go after 'em for the glory. 'Frank Luke, The Balloon Buster,' they're starting to call you. And you love it."

I grinned without feeling. "Got me there, Dan."

"Yeah. Hee-hee. I got you there." His face went pensive and he looked away from me. "I heard something about you the other day, Frank. They tell me you carry a .38 with you to knock yourself off if your plane catches fire."

I squeezed his hand. "Dan."

His thinlipped mouth went into rictus. "Not gonna catch me doin' that, Frank. I don't think burning up'd be so bad—"

"Dan—"

"'Dan'? *Dan*'?" He stared into my face, eyes fierce and blue. "I'm *Uncle* Dan to you, youngster!"

"Yes, sir."

"Listen, Ben," he said softly after a long pause. "That'd have been a man's way to die. Burnt into ashes in the skies over France. *That'd* have been a right fine way to go out."

I struggled to keep my voice

steady. "Take it easy, Uncle. You're not going to die. Just take it easy."

Back home in my apartment there was a message from OWney Busbee. The owner of Burly Curly's in 1939 was named Earl Eidson. There was no listing of that name in the phonebook, but a check with a contact at the credit bureau gave me an address in Franklin. As I left for my car I remembered the devastated block of Cass where Burly Curly's had stood so long ago and thought that, judging from the address, Earl Eidson had gotten out in one financial piece, indeed.

Earl Eidson offered me a cigar. Margrit Eidson offered me tea. I turned down both offers with thanks. We sat on their patio deck that offered a splendid view of Smithfield Lake beyond a long, smooth, freshly mowed zoysia lawn. It was warm and humid and cloudy, the kind of weather that signals the end of Indian summer.

Earl was short, burly, bald, and tan, dressed for golf. Margrit was tall and lanky in short-shorts and a roomy printed blouse, at the tail end of her years of real beauty. They were childless, wealthy, and, from the welcome they'd given me, anxious for company.

I said to them, "I'm a private detective, trying to track down

a woman who used to frequent your bar on Cass back in the late thirties."

"Burly Curly's," Margrit Eidson said affectionately. "I *miss* those days."

Earl Eidson's voice was booming, domineering. "We had lotsa regulars in those days, Perkins. Folks from when my dad ran the place. I inherited it from him, you know."

I didn't know, and didn't particularly care. "Woman's name was Lila." I paused. "That ring any bells?"

They looked at each other, shook their heads, and looked back at me expectantly.

I got my old picture of Uncle Dan out and laid it on the glass table in front of them. "She used to meet this man at your bar. Several times a week for months, I'm told."

They squinted at the picture, then reared back and reacted in unison, Margrit with an "Eep!," Earl with a grunt. Margrit looked at me and said in a strained voice, "I *knew* him! Dan! I knew him!"

"You bet she did," Earl said, voice low, glance averted.

"Where is he?" she asked me. "What's he doing?"

"Pushing up daisies, I hope," Earl grunted.

"He's my uncle." They studied me silently. "He's quite ill."

Margrit clasped long-fingered hands in front of her. "I'm

sorry to hear that." She looked anxiously at her husband and said, "Please, Earl. It was so long ago." She smiled sweetly. "I don't bring up Lucy, now do I?"

Eidson gave her a dark look, then said with a flat, stiff-lipped voice, "Sorry, Perkins."

Part of me was embarrassed, another part was amused. I'd always known Uncle Dan was a lady-killer in his day. "Do you remember the woman my uncle met there? Anything at all?"

Margrit Eidson straightened her spine, gave her husband a hesitant look, then said to me, "I remember her. I was . . . I was interested in Dan. It was over by the time he began meeting her there. I was jealous, I watched them." She put her hand on her husband's and squeezed it tightly. "Earl," she said urgently, "it was *her*! The mystery woman!"

His face brightened as he looked intently at his wife. "The shooting? The Joe Verdi thing?"

"What shooting? What the hell does old Joe Verdi have to do with this?" I asked faintly.

They looked at me like I'd just arrived from Mars. Earl Eidson barked, "You don't remember the Joe Verdi case?"

I raised both hands in a back-off gesture. "Joe Verdi I've heard of. But hell, in '39 I wasn't even born yet."

Margrit Eidson fairly bounced

with excitement. "Quick, Earl! Get the scrapbook!" Earl scraped his chair back and trotted into the house. Animation made Margrit's face look twenty years younger. "We never knew her name! The police asked us and *asked* us. And the reporters. Oh, we were in the news for *days* after that."

Earl Eidson returned with a string-bound scrapbook as thick as a lengthwise brick and laid it on the table in front of me. He sat back down next to his wife and, as I opened it, they leaned toward me, expecting me to be fascinated.

And I was.

Carlo Infante arrived at the I-75 rest stop near Trenton just after I did. The place was a mid-afternoon madhouse of truckers and tourists who stared anxiously at the threatening sky and ran ducking against the cool wind into the little buildings to answer the call of nature. As Infante dropped gracefully into the passenger seat of the Mustang and greeted me, I had to make an effort to divorce myself from the scrapbook and its vivid depiction of the Detroit organized mob scene of the late thirties. Carlo Infante, a top finance guy in today's Detroit organization, fit today's image well. Young, cool, smooth, colorless, a businessman.

"Had hell breaking away on such short notice, Perkins," he said as he got a cigarette and a lighter out of his snappy suit jacket. I don't know why he carries smoking equipment around with him; I've never in my life seen him actually light up.

I stared past the restroom buildings at the flat horizon, angry gray clouds roiling above it. "Joe Verdi still alive, Carlo?"

He stared at me, obviously caught off guard. "Well, sure he is, Ben. Retired, though, been for years. Why?"

"I want to see him."

Infante's surprise faded and he became guarded.

"Why?"

"There's an old bit I want to ask him about. Fellow named Henry Porch, gunned down back in '39 at a bar called Burly Curly's on Cass. Word is Verdi knows something about it."

Infante smirked. "You've got me at a disadvantage. I wasn't around then."

"Neither was I." I stared into his thin face. "Porch was an organization finance man. Department of Justice turned him, used him to get an indictment against Verdi for you-name-it. Pre-trial, smuggled him to Detroit, kept him in hiding till testimony time. But the Justice boys ran into a slight snag."

Infante sighed. "Since you mentioned a shooting, and since Verdi's never been convicted,

do I have to guess what the snag was?"

"Porch was gunned down late in August. Government lost its witness, Verdi walked. Strutted, more like."

"They prove anything on Verdi?" Infante asked.

"Nope. 'Course not. Had a pretty decent alibi, like about thirty-six thousand people at Briggs Stadium with him watching the Tigers."

"So what's your interest?"

I fired up a short cork-tipped cigar. "I'm not after Verdi," I said firmly. "I should give a damn, after all these years? But there was a woman in the bar. When Porch went down, she ran to him and hugged him and screamed. Then she took off, before the cops got there. Nobody ever got a line on her. 'The mystery woman,' the papers called her. I want her."

Infante toyed with his cigarette and his lighter for a long time, staring distantly out the windshield. "What makes you think Joe knows something about her?"

"Just hoping." I looked at him again through the upward stream of cigar smoke. "This is," I said distinctly, "historical research for an old, extremely important client. Nothing kicks back on nobody, guaranteed."

Infante smiled faintly. "I believe you, Ben. Question is, can I deliver a piece like this for

you." He thought. "I'll get the word to Savastano. He's next step up. Best you can hope for is a meet with him. I'll let you know."

As he opened the Mustang door, I put my hand on his shoulder. He looked at me. I said, "It's personal, Carlo. Extremely important to me personally. I got no other angles."

"What you gotta hope," Carlo said as he got out, "is that Savastano believes that as much as I do."

I was just approaching the I-94 interchange on the Southfield Freeway when my car phone rang. It was Marybeth. "Trouble at the hospital," she said.

"You there now?"

"Yes. Hurry, Ben."

"Ten minutes."

I swerved into the left lane of the Southfield and floored the accelerator. The big secondary carburetor ports opened to suck air and the Mustang leaped forward, turning the center lane stripes into a white blur.

Marybeth, dressed office-style in brown skirt and sleeveless white top, stood at Uncle Dan's hospital room and clapped her hands together when she saw me approach. "Ben—"

"Where is he?" I pushed past her into his room. It was a disaster area: furniture askew, paper wrappers strewn around

the floor, closet door ajar. My uncle lay on the bed, atop the covers, strips of cloth binding his wrists and ankle to the chrome railings of the bed. His face was frozen solid, lips pursed, and every wasted inch of his body bucked against the bindings as he gasped air convulsively through his mouth.

I felt Marybeth behind me. "What happened?" I asked.

"Cardiac episode," she whispered, taking my hand. "His respiration became irregular. All of a sudden the place was overrun with doctors and nurses, working on him. They shoved me out into the hall. I just got back in here a few minutes ago." She pressed her face against my shoulder. "It's the bowel obstruction. They're taking him into surgery soon. They say they—"

I cut her off with a gesture and approached my uncle. He bucked and wheezed, gasped and panted, eyes glued shut. I touched his forehead. It was burning up. I looked at Marybeth. "You call Bill?"

"Yes." She bit her lip. "He won't come, Ben. He can't handle this kind of thing. You know that."

"Libby?"

"No answer."

A nurse, an orderly, and an older man in a white jacket came into the room, wheeling a gurney. I stepped back around

the bed to Marybeth as the nurse and orderly untied my uncle and transferred him to the gurney. The doctor said to me, "We're taking him into surgery now."

He didn't look familiar. "You're Dr.—"

"Levin. Mr. Perkins' attending physician."

"Where's Dr. Senatkor?" I asked.

We stepped back to allow the gurney through the door. Dr. Levin repeated, "I'm the attending physician."

I found strength in my voice. "What *happened* to my uncle, doctor?"

Levin, a moonfaced, kindly looking man, said, "It's the bowel obstruction. He's collecting too many fluids. Infection could result. And he's weakened, especially his heart. We were hoping to build his strength first, but we have no choice. We have to correct the bowel obstruction now." He looked at Marybeth and back at me. "He's almost in a coma now," he said in a tone he assumed was comforting. "It's distressing to see, but he feels nothing, I assure you." He turned and left.

Marybeth walked aimlessly past Uncle Dan's empty bed to the window. "What are we supposed to do now?"

"Wait, I guess," I answered.

I'd just seated myself when a nurse's aide walked impor-

tantly into the room. "Oh, hey," she piped, "you've got to get these things out of here, folks."

"My uncle's in surgery," I said tonelessly.

"Well sure, but after that he'll be in ICU. Intensive care unit. Sixth floor. We need this bed for someone else." She began collecting Uncle Dan's things—suitcase, pillow, shaving kit, and other items—out of the closet. "You can take these to your car if you want," she said hopefully. "He won't need them up in ICU. Okay, folks? Thanks!"

I hijacked a wheelchair and used it to dolly Uncle Dan's things downstairs and out to my car. Back upstairs, on the sixth floor, I met Marybeth in the waiting room of the intensive care unit. We sat and waited, and looked at each other and at the TV, and watched other pinch-faced people waiting for word, throughout the afternoon, into the evening, well past nightfall.

Finally a young curly-haired man in a surgical gown came in the door and said, "Mr. Perkins?"

I bounded to my feet, followed by Marybeth. "That's me."

The doctor was twenty-eight, twenty-nine, tops. Where's Robert Young when you need him? He said, "I'm Dr. Sims. Bowel thing's squared away. Your uncle's in the ICU now."

He handled it 'bout as well as we could expect."

Marybeth said, "What are his chances for survival?"

Dr. Sims seemed to suppress an urge to shrug. "A lot better than they'd of been if we hadn't gone in again."

Take it at face value, Perkins, I said to myself. Don't press. But I had to ask, "What happened to Dr. Levin?"

Sims did shrug this time. "I'm the attending physician now, Mr. Perkins. You can see your uncle in the morning. Check the ICU visiting hours schedule on the bulletin board." He turned and left.

The United Airlines 747 had been at the gate for five minutes when the door from the jetway opened. Carlo Infante said to me, "Rick always flies first class. He'll be one of the first off."

"Fine." I watched the passengers start to stream toward us through the door. It was mid-morning, but for these passengers on the Los Angeles red-eye, it wasn't even sunrise yet, and they looked it.

I recognized Rick Savastano as he strode into the gate from the jetway. He was tall, well-built, with fighter-pilot good looks, dressed in a pale gray suit and maroon tie and carrying a wallet-thin leather briefcase. He nodded at Infante and

his eyes flickered coldly with recognition when he saw me. We fell into step walking up the concourse toward the terminal.

Savastano said, "Carlo filled me in by phone, Perkins. Make your case."

I did so, as briefly as I could, adding information about Lila and her relationship with Uncle Dan, and the note that had taken forty-five years to reach him. Savastano said, "This kind of soppy syrup sentimentality, I didn't expect that of you, Perkins."

"It's important."

Savastano's mouth twisted distastefully. "You're aware, of course, that Mr. Verdi has been retired from the business for years now. Steve Ritchie is running things."

"I know that. I don't want to step on anybody's toes. I want to go through channels."

We entered the terminal and threaded through crowds between the Delta and New York Air desks toward the big glass doors. Savastano looked at me and said, "First it's up to Steve. I don't smell any rats, but he might, and he's the boss. Then, if he goes along, it's up to the old man. That's where it ends, Perkins. We'll be in touch if it's a go."

We went through the automatic swinging doors. The sky was lead-gray and the wind crisp and chilly as we headed

toward the curb where a cream-colored Cadillac stretch purred. "I appreciate it," I answered, feeling bitter at being at this man's mercy. "Let me know either way, okay?"

The chauffeur trotted around the front of the limo and had the back door open just as Savastano reached it. Savastano looked down his long nose at me and said coldly, "We'll be in touch if it's a go, I said."

I thought about Uncle Dan strapped down convulsing in his hospital bed, and as I looked into Savastano's eyes I thought about how much I'd welcome a chance to take a real damaging poke at these bastards. It was a struggle to keep these feelings off my face, but I succeeded. I thanked them, waved, and trotted off for my car as Infante and Savastano boarded the Cadillac stretch and sighed away into the traffic.

Visiting hours in the intensive care unit were strange and rigidly enforced: odd hours only, ten minutes' duration. I showed up for the first, eleven A.M., directly from the airport.

Uncle Dan's room was half again the size of his former one. Much of his extra space was taken up with equipment: an electronic monitor on the wall showed changes in his heart-beat in digits and reflected the same in a scrolling, jagged se-

ries of lines; trees of IV bottles stood on each side of the bed, their tubes snaking down and under his sheet; a ventilator loomed on the left side of his bed, its big plastic accordion-like plunger going up and down with pneumatic sighs, echoed by the rising and falling of my uncle's thin chest.

He lay stiffly on his back, the oxygen tube affixed to his nose, ventilator tube inserted in his mouth, his arms tied down to the rails of the bed. His eyes were closed.

I leaned down to his ear and said, "Uncle?"

His eyes opened. Though cloudy, they showed recognition. He raised a clawlike hand and waved to me. I said, "I know you can't talk. Don't try."

His mouth formed a grisly smile around the mouthpiece of the ventilator.

His wasted face, so unfamiliar, made me feel sick inside. I said heartily, "Thirty-one victories, remember, Uncle? Thirty-one of them bastard Jerries."

He nodded jerkily and his right hand contorted into a thumbs-up. Poor guy. I was trying to hearten him, and all he wanted to do was hearten me.

I said, "You done got through that, and you done made it through this operation, too. You're gonna walk out of here,

Uncle. Take a lot more'n this place to kill you, you tough old son of a bitch. Be sure to kiss the nurses as you go. Maybe even pat 'em on the ass, too. They won't mind."

He kept smiling.

"I'll be back here later on today, Uncle. Marybeth's coming for the afternoon visits. Libby'll be by later, too. You'll see."

I looked around the room. Hard to talk when nothing gets said back. I looked back at him. "On Lila. I'm making progress. I know part of the story. I ought to know the rest soon. I'll keep on it, Uncle. You and me'll whip up some Tom and Jerry and I'll fill you in later. Okay?"

He nodded again, eyes fixed on me, filled with spirit and defiance. The ten minutes were over and I said goodbye and went back to my apartment to wait for Savastano's call.

But Marybeth called first, about three-thirty. She was crying. "He looks so awful, Ben."

"Hey, he's been through two operations—"

"But he was *crying!*" she wailed. "Both times, when I saw him. I tried to cheer him up—told him about the family and old times, and—"

"Steady on, kid," I said, not so steady myself.

"He keeps pointing to his mouth. It's so dry, and—his lips are cracked and—he wants

something to drink and—I can't give it to him and—I can't *help* him!"

"Once he's off that damn ventilator, we'll be able to help him, Marybeth."

"Ben," she said, getting control of herself, "do you think he's going to die?"

"Hey," I said loudly, "Dan's been through it all. He survived the fight on the overpass in '36, remember that? When three union-busting goons tried to put him away? He survived that, and he'll survive this."

"Okay. Okay." We stayed silent for a while, then she said, "You coming back later?"

"Yeah, I'll make the seven for sure. And Libby'll probably be out today, too."

"No, she won't," Marybeth said. "She says she'll come but she never does and she never will and you know it."

"I'll be out later," I said, and hung up.

Five minutes later, Rick Savastano called.

Our Lady of Perpetual Mercy Hospital is a small, exclusive, private facility at the lakefront foot of Edgemont in Grosse Pointe Park. A pair of anonymous, suited goons met me at the doors and walked me to another pair, who rode up with me in the elevator and turned me over to yet a third pair on the sixth floor landing. These

gentlemen escorted me into a suite that was more like a luxurious hotel than a hospital. Lying in the center of the large bed facing the picture window which looked out over Lake St. Clair was the wizened, yet vigorous looking, Joe "Gunboats" Verdi.

Flanked by his goons, I stopped at bedside. Verdi, a jowly man with a full head of solid gray hair and dressed in loud red pajamas, smiled at me sardonically. His voice was, totally unexpectedly, weak, wispy, forced. "Ben Perkins?"

"Right, Mr. Verdi."

"The boys said you wanted to talk to me about the old days," Verdi wheezed. I realized that by "boys" Verdi meant Steve Ritchie and Rick Savastano, each of whom was pushing fifty if not past it.

"That's right. I'm wondering about the shooting in Burly Curly's bar back in '39. I told Savastano this is research only, nothing you tell me'll kick back now or ever."

"I should worry about kick-backs?" Verdi squeaked. He patted his bull-like chest. "I've got the Big C, liver. I got maybe a month or two. Nothing that happens now could ever hurt me worse'n I'm about to be hurt." His eyes turned crafty. "But if you're asking me if I ordered the hit on that rat-faced little snitch Porch, I'll be forced

with all honesty to say, 'No comment.'"

The last thing I expected to do there was laugh. This was, after all, Gunboats Verdi, Detroit organization boss for fifty years with maybe four times that many murders on his sheet. And though he was dying, he was dying in a place with ten times the luxury of the little room in which Uncle Dan was fighting for his life. But I laughed anyway.

Verdi laughed too, ending in a sick, rasping cough that turned his lined face purplish-red. He took an empty cup and spit into it, then set the cup down. When he looked back at me, his eyes were cold and dark, the eyes of a dying old man looking at a vigorous younger one. "What do you want to know?" he whispered.

"My uncle was meeting a woman there at the bar," I said. "He was deeply involved with her, but he didn't know much about her. She disappeared right after the shooting. Witnesses have told me that the woman he was meeting seemed to know Porch very well." I paused. "Her first name was Lila. I'm trying to find her. Do you know anything that might help me?"

"Quicksilver," Verdi rasped. He coughed again and repeated the name. "Lila Quicksilver. Porch's fiancée. He brought her to Detroit with him while he

waited to testify against me."

Oh boy. I felt my heart pound as I said, "Where'd she go, Mr. Verdi?"

"Chicago," he answered readily. "Still there, in fact." He squinted at my expression and smiled. "How do I know? I kept tabs. I didn't know if she might decide to turn state's evidence the way Porch tried to. And she was an interesting chick. . . . Your uncle has good taste. A lot like me."

I thought, Uncle Dan's like you only in that he's dying, too. It was the first time I'd consciously thought that Uncle Dan was going to die.

Verdi said in what for him was a kindly way, "You're trying to find Lila for your uncle, is that it?"

"That's right."

He waved an imperious hand at one of the goons. "Larry, call Savastano for me. Tell him, the notebook in the safe, under the name Lila Quicksilver. Have him call her, give her Mr. Perkins' name and say he's trying to reach her. Ask her to call him."

"Sure, Mr. Verdi," one of the faceless goons stirred.

Verdi smiled at me. "There. That help you, son?"

One last exercise of power of a dying man. But he could have refused to see me, could have refused to help. I smiled and nodded. "Thanks, Mr. Verdi."

"Maybe," Verdi said with a narrow look, "you'll remember that I did you this service."

"I *will* remember it, Mr. Verdi. Thanks."

Not that he'd be around long enough for it to do him any good.

I met Marybeth in the ICU waiting room just before one the next day. She looked pale and exhausted and though she held her knitting in her lap, it didn't look as if she'd made any progress since the previous day.

As I sat beside her, she took my hand and said, "He wasn't so good at eleven o'clock. He refused to look at me. Didn't wave, didn't wink, didn't smile."

I breathed deeply. "What'd the doctor say? How's Dan doing?"

"Dr. Bates talked to me. Said Uncle's got serious infections. They're fighting to stabilize him, changing medications."

"Bates? Who's Bates? Didn't you talk to Sims?"

"Sims? But Dr. Bates said he's the attending surgeon now."

I gritted my teeth and said in a low voice loud enough to attract the attention of the other visitors, "Can't a man have a *doctor* of his *own* any more?"

Marybeth shrugged helplessly.

"What about the ventilator?" I asked in a lower tone.

She shook her head. "Doctor

said Uncle Dan'll need it at least another week, till he's under control and they've turned the infections around." She gnawed her lip, reached out and put her hand on mine. "Brace yourself. He's accumulated fluids. He's gained twenty-five pounds in fluids just since yesterday, Ben. He looks just ... awful."

One o'clock came and we went into Uncle Dan's room. Nothing had changed. Same equipment, same bottles, same tubes, same monitor with its blinking numbers and jagged lines, same ventilator hissing and wheezing, breathing life into Uncle Dan.

The fluid retention was obvious. Uncle Dan looked swollen and shiny, like a newborn baby, skin stretched so tight it looked as if it was about to split. His eyes opened when I spoke to him: "How's things, big fella?"

He stared at me and did not move.

"I'm back again, Uncle Dan," Marybeth smiled as she leaned and kissed him on the cheek.

He looked at us and then raised a hand as far as the cloth restraint would let him and pointed toward the ceiling.

I looked where he pointed. Nothing. "What is it, Uncle? What do you need?"

He lowered his hand, then raised it, pointed his index finger to his temple and

dropped his thumb.

I looked away quickly, eyes burning. Marybeth looked at me with frightened eyes and said as cheerfully as she could, "The doctor says you're getting along fine, Uncle Dan. No time at all you'll be out of here. And we'll have a big party for you. Right, Ben?"

We talked like that for the full ten minutes, more to each other than to my uncle, and all the while he pointed to the ceiling again and again and again.

I'd just arrived at my apartment to shower and change clothes when the telephone rang.

"Ben Perkins?" asked the long-distance female voice.

"You got him."

"I'm Lila." Silence. "Lila Quicksilver."

"Oh. Hi." I sat down on the couch, pressing the receiver to my ear. "Glad you called, I—"

"Actually my last name is Brockmann now, I'm married."

"Uh-huh. Okay." Silence. "The, uh—you get told why I wanted to talk to you?"

Her voice was guarded. "Something about the shooting?"

"Really I'm calling about Dan. Dan Perkins. He's my uncle."

This time the silence went on so long I thought she'd hung up. But she said, "Dan? How nice. How's he doing?"

"Not so good. But Lila—Ms.

Quicksilver—Mrs. Brockmann—let me ask you, you were close to my uncle, right?”

“That was many years ago.”

“Forget that! You were real close, I know that. How’d you meet him? What was your connection with Henry Porch?”

“I don’t want to talk about that. It’s nobody’s business. It’s past and buried.”

Unwillingly, I said, “Fine, tell me or don’t tell me, that’s not important now. What is important is something that you never knew.” I paused. “Dan never got your note. Not till just a few days ago.”

A long pause. “No.”

“It’s true. He never got it. He never knew what happened to you. You disappeared and he wondered about you for all these years and *he never knew* and he never forgot about you.”

“No,” she said definitely. “Even life isn’t that cruel.”

“Oh yeah? Well, try this. Right now my uncle is in intensive care at Greater Detroit Metro Hospital. He’s strapped down and on a respirator and . . . and he’s eighty-seven and alone and drugged and fighting for his life. *Tell me about cruel, Lila.*”

“Well, what am I supposed to do about it? All that was my whole life ago. I cared for Dan but he wasn’t there when I needed him, and there’s nothing I can do for him now!”

“You just do what you want,” I said, standing. “But you should know that you were special to him. And he never got your note. And if he had, he’d have been there at Burly Curly’s for you. And he never married, Lila, and he never forgot you. Just do what you want, though. You just do what you damn well please.”

I slammed the phone down and stomped in several aimless circuits of my living room. Withholding information from a private detective *just isn’t done*, I thought.

Then I went into my kitchen in search of a Stroh’s tall boy and the half-bottle of black Jack I’d been saving.

3.

THE FOREVER TRIP

The ringing phone brought my eyes open. I focused on the orange numerals of the bedside clock: one thirty-five A.M. I wrestled the receiver to my ear with numb hands. “Perkins.”

“This is Detroit Metro Hospital,” came the brisk female voice. “The doctor has asked me to contact the family of Dan Perkins. We think you should get here right away.”

“What’s wrong?” I mumbled, raising myself.

She said carefully, “There’s been some cardiac disturbance. The doctor thought it best that

family representatives be present."

"Okay, all right, I'll be there." I hung up the phone, switched on the nightstand light, picked up the receiver again, and dialed my brother Bill's number. He answered with a grunt. I said, "Wake up, bro, there's trouble at the hospital."

"Oh no." He paused. "You going, Ben?"

"I'm rolling. You?"

Marybeth came on. "I'll be dressed and on my way in five minutes, Ben."

"I'll pick you up."

"No, it's quicker, I'll meet you there." She hung up.

The intensive care unit never closes. The waiting room was thronged with exhausted people, waiting for word on traffic victims and shooting victims and disease victims; they bore identical signs of strain mixed with equal measures of hope, fear, and resignation.

Marybeth, dressed in jeans and a white top, met me at the big double doors, and we silently pushed through them and went to the desk. I gave my name to the nurse. "Oh, yes, the Perkins family," she said. "Just step into the office there, the doctor will be right with you."

We went into the closetlike, booklined office. Marybeth took the single chair, I leaned against the door. We said nothing. After

a few minutes a short black woman in a white coat that blinked with stethoscope and other hardware came in. "I'm Dr. Johnson," she announced to us generally. "You're the Perkins family?"

"Where's Dr. Bates?" I asked, then repeated with her: "You're the attending physician."

She smiled at us and stepped past Marybeth to seat herself behind the tiny desk. Marybeth asked, "What happened to Uncle Dan?"

She was smooth, practiced, professional. "He had an episode of cardiac arrest. But, happily, we were able to resuscitate him and restore his blood pressure."

For the first time since Uncle Dan had gone into the hospital, my sister-in-law Marybeth let go. Not angrily, but with ultimate despair: "Oh, no. *Why* did you bring him back?"

Dr. Johnson blinked, her composure broken for a moment. "Well, we had to, in order to—"

"He's *dying*!" Marybeth pressed. "He's been dying since he came here. Why, oh *why* didn't you just let him go?"

Dr. Johnson sat back and drew herself up. "There are no instructions on file as to the family's wishes in the event of a life-threatening crisis," she said formally.

"You want instructions?" The

women looked at me. "I'll give you instructions. I don't want my uncle strapped down like a piece of meat any more. I don't want him hooked up to miracle machines and pumped full of drugs and fed through tubes any more. I don't want my uncle reduced to the level of an experiment for ego-tripping doctors. I don't—"

Dr. Johnson cut in sharply, "If we remove medical support, your uncle will die."

"Then so be it." I looked at Marybeth for approval and saw it. "If he can't live without the machines, then he ain't living, and if he understood that, he'd agree with me."

"Very well," Dr. Johnson said, briskly rising. "We'll call you when we're ready."

It took ten minutes, and then we were ushered into Uncle Dan's room and left alone with him there.

Marybeth sat on his left, I sat on his right. She took one of his hands, I sat there and watched him. His eyes were open and dull, his body shrunken, his chest rising and falling in accord with the puffing of the ventilator. I became fixated by the numerals on the monitor that registered his heartbeat. When we came in it was reading in the one hundred thirties.

Long moments went by. A nurse looked in on us. One hundred twelve. I looked at

Marybeth. Her face was narrow and pinched and she tried to smile at me and looked back into Uncle Dan's face.

The rate dropped below one hundred.

I stood up and walked around the bed, looking at my uncle from each angle. He was silent, vacant. The machine said sixty-five.

I sat back down. Marybeth looked up at the monitor, then bent and kissed Uncle Dan and whispered something in his ear. Down to forty now.

I tried to say something, thought better of it, then said it anyhow: "I won't forget your stories, Uncle."

"No," Marybeth chimed in. "None of us will." The monitor read into the thirties and, as I watched, dipped to twenty-five. The graph register below showed its jagged peaks much less frequently now, and they weren't as sharp-edged.

Twenty, fifteen, ten, seven, two, zero.

Zero. Zero. Zero.

The graph register made waves like the long swells of a gentle ocean and then went flat.

The ventilator pumped mindlessly on.

Marybeth looked up at me, tears streaming silently, heavily down her thin cheeks. I sighed and wiped my eyes and pressed Uncle Dan's hand one

last time. The door to the room opened and Dr. Johnson came in. "Please accept my condolences on the passing of your uncle," she said.

We stood. I said huskily, "Thank you, doctor."

She said, "If you would, I need some information about the arrangements, Mr. Perkins."

I looked at Marybeth. "Would you?"

She nodded, throat bobbing. She walked around the bed and pressed the entire length of her body against me, dampening my shoulder. Then she turned and followed the doctor out of the room.

I looked down at my uncle for a long, long time. Then I stepped out of the room, closed the door, and stood with my back to it in the empty hall.

I thought: No one can touch him any more. I won't let them. I'm the detective and he's my client, and I fix things and help people and protect them, and I won't let anyone hurt him any more.

Libby said harshly, "I demand an explanation as to *why* my uncle was cremated so quickly."

We sat, the remains of Uncle Dan's family, in the cool, well-furnished silence of the funeral home's parlor: my sister Libby, slimmer than when I'd seen her

last a couple of years before, dressed in a white blouse and expensive blue suit; my brother Bill, short, bald, big-shouldered, wearing a tan blazer and tie and dark slacks; and his wife Marybeth, tall, whip-thin, and elegant in a midnight blue dress with a thin string of pearls around her neck.

Mr. Roski, the baby-faced, pudgy funeral director, adjusted his thick glasses and looked at me. "Those were the instructions we had from Mr. Ben Perkins, Mrs. Gillespie."

Libby shot me a dirty look. I said, "It's what he wanted, Libby."

"Like hell!" she spat. "You had no *right* to make that kind of decision without clearing it with the family, you insensitive ghoul!"

Bill and Marybeth looked uncomfortable, their eyes meeting no one. I said as evenly as I could, "I most certainly knew what he wanted, Libby. I took care of his finances for him for years. I visited him every week. Where the hell were *you* on his birthday and Christmas? Where the hell were *you* when he was dying in the hospital? Who the hell are *you* to swoop in here and start calling people names?"

"I'm his *niece*," she shot back shrilly, "and I *won't* stand by and allow my uncle to—to be *discarded*, like some kind of *refuse*, without a proper funeral!"

Mr. Roski cleared his throat and said carefully, "Of course, our facility stands ready to assist the Perkins family with whatever arrangements you mutually decide to make." He had his eyes on Libby all the while.

She said, ticking fingers as she talked, "We want a *coffin*, and a proper visitation period, and a service in the Baptist church and burial in a nice cemetery. The way it's supposed to be." She looked imperiously at my brother. "What do you say, Bill?"

He sighed, flicked me a look, and nodded to Libby.

"Marybeth?"

Her look my way was regretful, but she had to go along with her husband.

Mr. Roski clapped his hands once and stood. "Then it's decided! Very well. Mrs. Gillespie," he said, taking Libby's arm, "we have a fine selection of coffins and vaults to choose from in the next room. Let me show you . . ."

They left the room, Bill and Marybeth trailing them. I walked out, turned, went through the lobby, and left the building.

As I crossed the parking lot to my car, I looked at the rolling stone-dotted hills of the cemetery and thought, there's no way I'm leaving my uncle in this place.

The visitation at the funeral home the next evening was, thanks to Libby's calls to the newspapers, well-attended. Libby herself held forth in one corner, flanked by Bill and Marybeth and surrounded by old people who knew Dan somewhere or another. I sat alone in the opposite corner, my eyes on the closed bronze coffin which sat on the altar-like stand amid an array of floral arrangements.

Toward the end of the visitation, as the crowd started to thin, I became aware of a woman standing near me. Late sixties, wisp-thin, heavy gray-streaked dark hair cropped close. "Mr. Perkins?" she asked.

She wasn't familiar. "Yes."

Her blue eyes were large in her thin face. She stepped closer to me, looking at me intently. "Mr. Ben Perkins?"

"Yes," I said with some impatience. Probably some mortuary ghoul or professional mourner or something.

Her smile made her look younger. "You do look a little like him. He was just about your age when I knew him." She caught my look and added, flustered, "Oh! Excuse me! I'm Lila. Lila Quicksilver."

"Well, jeez." I stood clumsily and shook her thin, firm hand. "You made it, huh? Well, that's something."

"I thought about it," she an-

swered, looking away from me. "It must have been a lot of trouble for you to track me down. And Dan and I were—we were very close." She looked back at me. "And you said he never got my note."

"Never did."

She shook her head. "Such a shame. How different our lives would have been, if. If, if, if."

"Yeah." She took the chair next to me and we sat and looked at the coffin. "So, tell me. How did it happen? Who was Henry Porch? How did you get to know Uncle Dan?"

She sighed. "Henry and I were engaged. Living in Chicago. He decided to turn state's evidence in an investigation of Joe Verdi. The FBI brought us to Detroit incognito to wait for Henry to testify. We thought the trial would start quickly. But it didn't. We waited and waited. Days. Weeks. Months. Hiding."

"How'd you meet Dan?"

"I'm getting to that." She paused. "I was afraid. Afraid, and bored. I hadn't known the depth of Henry's involvement with the mob till then. I was afraid of what those men would do to him if they caught him. And I was bored, cooped up in that grimy little motel room day after day. So I began to go out, alone."

"To Burly Curly's."

"Yes. I met Dan there." Her

voice softened and I felt her eyes on me. "He was a fine man. Much older than me, of course. But so handsome and dashing, a real wicked twinkle in his eye, yet decent and gentle too. I became infatuated with him, Mr. Perkins."

"Did you tell him about Porch and the investigation?"

"Of course not! I never even told Dan my last name. I was afraid. And ashamed. I began to think about Dan, about leaving Henry and going to Dan, where I'd be safe."

I closed my eyes and sighed. "So what happened?"

"One day Henry got a phone call. I don't know what was said, but it terrified him. I was convinced that Verdi's people had tracked Henry down and were going to kill him. I dashed off a note to Dan and mailed it, asking him to meet me that evening at Burly Curly's. I was going to tell him the whole story and ask him to take me away. I went to the bar and waited, but Dan never came. Instead, Henry showed up. He'd gotten word of where I went, somehow. As he came in the door, two men with shotguns followed him and shot him."

She touched my arm and I felt her hand tremble. After a moment she went on, "I . . . I went a little hysterical, I think. But I got out of there and made it to the bus station and grabbed

the first bus west. All the way back to Chicago. And I've been there ever since and lived a quiet life and thought all that trouble was behind me." Her voice deepened. "Till the other day, when that horrible man from Verdi's organization called."

"I'm glad you came," I said.

"Just wish I'd come in time to see him."

We stared silently at the coffin a long time. It was late, everyone else had gone, leaving us alone in the room. She said suddenly, "One thing I know for sure. Dan wouldn't have wanted—" she gestured around the room—"all *this*."

"You're right." I roused myself and stretched and looked at her. "I got some thoughts on that. Want to help?"

"How?"

I told her.

She looked back at the coffin and then at me, eyes misty. "I'm with you," she whispered. "But I want to be in it all the way, Ben."

I snorted. "Come on! It's gonna be dangerous."

She smiled wickedly. "I may look sixty-eight, but I'm as young as you, maybe younger. And I want to do this for Dan."

I shrugged. "Okay." I glanced around, the room was still empty. "Now's as good a time as any. Ready?"

She stood, went to the door of the visitation room, peered out,

then nodded to me.

I walked up to the coffin, hoping it was unlocked.

It was,

People drifted across the grass away from the gravesite, hunched in their jackets against the cool, sundrenched breeze. Lila and I were halfway to my car when Libby caught up with us. She certainly was dressed for the role of chief mourner in a black dress, black stockings, black shoes, and a black hat equipped with a veil, for heaven's sake. Ignoring Lila, Libby took my arm.

"I'm sure glad that's all over," she sighed. "These things are so hard on a person, don't you think?"

"True enough."

She swept the veil back from her face. "But don't you agree with me now, Ben? This is the right way, the *proper* way to see to things."

"Anyway, you got it done."

"Listen," she said eagerly, "I'm having everyone over to the house for an early supper. It's important that the *family*—" she gave Lila a meaningful look—"hang together in times like this, don't you think?"

I felt sick. "Thanks anyhow. We've got business." Taking Lila's arm, I turned my back on Libby and made for my car.

The second seat—which I

generally use for cargo, never for a passenger—of my modified Maxair Hummer sits directly behind the pilot's seat. I helped Lila into it and strapped her in. She sat nervously, looking tiny in slacks and a warm wool jacket, but she nodded at me with a defiant smile.

I completed the pre-flight inspection of the aircraft by checking the translucent plastic gas tank one last time. Full. Dropping into the bucket seat, I tucked my leather jacket tight around me—despite the full sunlight, it was a chilly day—positioned my feet on the rudder bar, primed the engine with a couple of squeezes of the pressure bulb, set the choke, cracked the throttle, and after yelling “clear!” (even though there was nobody but Lila in sight), I gave the T-handle a good jerk. The 250cc Zenoah engine engaged, barfed, blatted, and caught into a good healthy purr from its mounting ten feet behind us. Killing the choke, I set the throttle at about two thousand rpm and sat back to let her warm up.

It was midday, mid-week. There were no golfers using the Norwegian Wood course. Wind was steady at twelve knots out of the southwest—a bit stronger than I'd have preferred, but this wasn't exactly a pleasure flight we were embarking on.

Everything was set. “Here

we go!” I hollered over my shoulder. I goosed the throttle and the Hummer began to roll. I swung her around toward the southwest, edged the throttle up a little more, and pressed the stick forward to raise the tail. We passed high taxi, I gave her more gas, the aircraft rolled faster and swayed, the wind began to sing in the flying wires, and just as we reached the eighth green, we left the ground. I did the pattern, tested the wind, checked the trim of the ship, then made a sweeping turn and, gaining altitude all the while, headed almost due west toward Stapfer Lake.

“This is wonderful!” came Lila's reedy voice amid the rush of the wind. Your first time in an ultralight does that to you. You're sitting out in the open, no cockpit, nothing above you but wings and nothing below you but a couple of aluminum frame members and, way, way down, the ground.

We were at a thousand feet by the time we got to the lake. It wandered around jerkily in a wide blue bowl, marred here and there by whitecaps, circled by dense woods. I circled the lake and then, applying maximum stick and throttle, took her up close to five thousand.

The wind was calmer there. The lake looked smaller. Roughly in the center was the small wooded island that Uncle

Dan owned. I could see, amid the scrub and trees, the charred ruins of his old cabin, torched a few years ago by a maniac who was trying to kill me and got someone else instead. I put the aircraft on a steady trimmed course traversing the lake, gripped the stick between my knees, reached to the down-tube, and unstrapped the medium-sized aluminum canister from it.

The screw-top was hard to get loose but I finally spun it off and tossed it. I reached around the seat and put the canister into Lila's waiting hands. I sideslipped for a moment to correct my course and then, when dead center over the lake, I said, "All right."

Lila leaned down, tipped the canister, and let the ashes stream out.

They fell in a solid gray funnel. Caught by the windstream, they fanned out wider and wider in a descending ever-lightening V. When the canister was empty, Lila tossed it over the starboard side. I poured power to the

Hummer engine, climbed steeply, then leveled, and we looked down silently.

Caught by the lower wind currents and illuminated by the sun, the ashes fell toward the blue water in a just visible, glinting veil, then disappeared.

I sat up in the bucket seat. Couldn't do France for you, Uncle, but this is the next best thing.

I kicked the wings over, set the throttle a notch higher to maintain lift in the tail wind, and headed for home.

After a moment Lila leaned forward and said, over the engine and wind noise, "You know what Dan called it?"

"What?"

"Death."

"No. I don't remember him ever mentioning it."

"He hated euphemisms like 'everlasting life' and 'eternal rest' and 'the big sleep' and things like that. Said they made assumptions."

"Sounds like him. So what *did* he call it?"

"The forever trip."

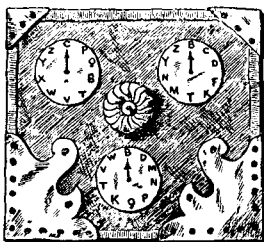
UNSOLVED

by H. E. Dudeney

Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?

In the following account—part of a long, multi-part puzzle—the king's jester, who has fallen into disfavor, is trying to escape from prison. How he did so will be revealed in the October issue.

When I did at last reach the door it was fast closed, and on sliding a panel set before a grating the light that came in thereby showed unto me that my passage was barred by the king's secret lock. Before the handle of the door might be turned, it was needful to place the hands of three several dials in their proper places. If you but knew the proper letter for each dial, the secret was of a truth to your hand; but as ten letters were upon the face of every dial,



you might try nine hundred and ninety-nine times and only succeed on the thousandth attempt withal. If I was indeed to escape I must waste not a moment.

Now, once had I heard the learned monk who did invent the lock say that he feared that the king's servants, having such bad memories, would mayhap forget the right letters; so perchance, thought I, he had on this account devised some way to aid their memories. And what more natural than to make the letters form some word? I soon found a word that was English, made of three letters—one letter being on each of the three dials. After that I had pointed the hands properly to the letters the door opened and I passed out.

What was the secret word?

See page 121 for the solution to the August puzzle.

"The Secret Lock," taken from The Canterbury Puzzles by H. E. Dudeney. Copyright © 1958 by Dover Publications, Inc., New York, N.Y.



It is misleading and very likely expensive to regard my friend Tony Smooth as a practicing con man. For, as Noel Coward remarked in a different context, practice doesn't come into it, the wretch being perfect at what he does. And what, or rather who, he does is other people.

Wonder about his apprenticeship, how Smooth got started, and he will tell you. "I may be a crook, but I'm a patriot, too. The minute we declared war on Mr. Hitler in 1939, guess who lied about his age to get into the

army three years before they came and fetched him? Silly little beggar, I was!"

That's hard to believe, since the mature, present-day Smooth has a sly grin and the aura of a fox, with russet hair to complete the image. "Ah," he points out, "but back in 1940 when I was Bombardier Smooth, T., pride of the Royal Artillery—well, *I* was proud enough to bust, anyway—I was honest as the day is long.

"Truly. I didn't know any better, see. Hadn't found my . . . what's that spraucy French

Illustration by Nick Jainschigg

word? *Métier*, that's the joker. I was fifteen years old, big for my age, and probably thought a *métier* was something you shoved coins in to keep the lights and gas fire going. Oh yes, I was too green to even consider being a villain.

"One night changed all that and put me on the path to my chosen career." Here Tony Smooth tends to smirk so smugly, disturbingly, that one almost sees chicken feathers fluttering at the corners of his mouth.

Such is ex-Bombardier Smooth's preamble to the war-time legend of an impossible crime, the riddle of The Ultimate Pickpocket.

Smooth liked army life. Most recruits were shocked by its austerity, discomfort, loud authority, and lousy food. To a London slum kid, all that was a marked improvement: new clothes, plenty to eat. Certainly he got shouted at, but Tony Smooth had endured that and worse, without khaki compensations.

Training over, he was posted to an anti-aircraft battery in Scotland, and that did shake him. Especially since they sent him off on his own, with warrants to cover train and bus travel. Until donning uniform he'd seldom left his two-square-

mile Cockney ghetto. Scotland might have been fabled Cathay, far Samarkand. . . .

The first train was packed, its schedule a bad joke. There were stops to avoid air raids, detours to avoid bomb damage, halts for priority freight to go through. It took Tony Smooth the best part of two days to reach Inverness, sleeping on the corridor floor with his helmet and pack for pillows; and that was hardly two-thirds of the trek.

He was heading for somewhere called Gaddack Head in the bleakly extreme north.

Back at holding camp near Dover, the Orderly Room clerk had grunted, "You can't miss it, son. Go any farther and you'll fall off the end of the British Isles." At Inverness he must leave the main-line train, getting a local to Allum Beg Junction. There the day's first and last bus, at five P.M., would carry the warrior a final fifty miles to Gaddack Head, where there were at least three guns and, it was rumored, a searchlight or two.

Smooth was relieved to find other travelworn servicemen on Platform 4 at Inverness. The RAF kept a weather station at Gaddack Head, it seemed, and the Royal Navy had fueling facilities on a nearby inlet. Six months in the army had given

young Smooth a herd instinct, and the sight of more uniforms soothed him. Not much, however, since his new companions looked either shifty or brutal.

Eventually an antique, tinpot little train with a mere brace of chickenshack carriages took them aboard and began faltering into the Highlands without urgency or much conviction.

"Gaddack Head?" scoffed a three-badge stoker who filled a bench seat by himself and stank like a distillery explosion. "Good luck, kid! Soldiers up there are cannibals, well known for it. Can't blame 'em, bunch of hungry squaddies get snowed in for a month with five days' rations . . ."

Tony Smooth trusted that the monster was joking. Stoker had confided, earlier, that he was freshly out of military prison, and Smooth was quite confident that had been no jest.

The other service passengers were two RAF Leading Aircraftmen, one like a messily thawing icicle with a perpetual dewdrop on his spiky nose, the other a grinning, restless-eyed midget nicknamed, of course, Lofty. They weren't much older than Smooth, but cocky with it, and he didn't trust them an inch. Within minutes they'd dealt him a dozen successive losing hands at blackjack. Lofty

and his pal Icicle weren't good sharpers but, outnumbering the young soldier, didn't need to be. He simply stopped playing.

The short winter's day plunged towards evening. Tony Smooth couldn't afford a watch but felt in his bones that Allum Beg Junction was still far off while the solitary bus's departure time was not.

The others confirmed both theories without sharing Smooth's panic. Sure, they yawned, he was supposed to report at the Gaddack Head battery at 2100 hours that night. "But," the stoker pointed out, "even pig-ignorant soldiers know the trains are no good. You turn up before the week's out, they'll be happy."

"That's the ticket," Icicle agreed. "All in the same boat, we are. I'm happy. Cast-iron alibi for an extra day off the leash. We'll find a decent boozier at this Allum Whatsit place, have a laugh and a shout with the girls, doss down somewhere . . ."

All new to Scotland, the party assumed that Allum Beg Junction would be a typical dull railway township, but even dull towns boast pubs and girls. Their shared assumption was optimistic by about a thousand percent.

Because Allum Beg Junction turned out to be exactly that,

part of the transport system and no more.

They arrived in windy darkness with a fingernail of moon. The moment the train jolted on its way, the wind rose several notches, fairly howling and implicit with sleet. Appalled at such desolation, Tony Smooth stared around wildly and spotted a dim figure skulking off at the far end of the platform.

When he hailed it desperately, backed by Stoker's enraged booming, the figure paused. Then it emitted an extraordinary sound, a kind of snarling bleat at once wordless and eloquent of hostility and fervent indifference to the fate of Sassenach passengers. Clambering aboard a bicycle, the figure pedaled off for dear life.

Teeth chattering, Lofty returned from fruitless searching for any other staff. "Not a pane of glass in the waiting room windows, lads. It's warmer out here, honest."

Icicle, stamping his feet and flailing his arms, whined, "How far is it to the town, then—which way?"

Stoker roared, "This is it, there isn't any town, you foolish person." That was his gist; the unexpurgated retort took fifteen seconds and twice as many adjectival epithets.

"There's got to be houses near," young Smooth argued,

with a Cockney's confidence that dwellings, like rocks and trees, were a part of every natural landscape; and he set off to find one. The only way to go was along a lane, its surface luminous with frost, beside the railway line. Since exploration would keep them warm—less chilled at any rate—the others swore but followed.

Half a mile on, Stoker growled satirically, "Got to be houses, kid?" Stoker obviously detested hiking, and Icicle was grizzling savagely, questioning Tony Smooth's sense of direction and parentage alike.

The whistling made them jump, Lofty halting so abruptly that he fell over.

Not a metal whistle but the cheerily human signal for attention that demands good lungs and two fingers stuck in the mouth. Followed by a woman's voice calling, "Over this way, lads. Find the gate in the wall, come on in. You're home for the night!"

The Crofters Arms, where Molly Green had led Tony Smooth and the rest, wasn't that homely. It was an ex-pub, a former inn, a hostelry that had been drummed out of the regiment.

"Miserable devils, the Scotch," Mrs. Green said, tone less sour than the words. "Soon as my old

man took it into his head to go back to sea, they turned round and said a woman on her own wasn't fit to run a pub. Me, what's been barmaid at every pub in Lambeth! Practically. But they took the license away."

They were shrugging out of their packs and straps, peeling off overcoats and stowing kit-bags in a corner of the bar parlor, a flagstone-floored room, low ceiling varnished brown by generations of pipes and cheap cigarettes, shutters closed over the windows with brown gummed-paper strips sealing every chink. In 1940, letting light escape risked a fine and suspicion of being a Nazi spy and, more to the point, inviting a bomb.

It was a sad room that had never been that jolly. Its sole decorations were a last year's calendar from a brewery and farm-sale and flower show posters, months out of date.

Tony Smooth and company weren't complaining about the ambience. Compared to outdoors, the place was positively snug. Especially since Molly Green had invited, "You're welcome to doss down on the benches, I've got plenty of old blankets for begging. No charge, not to lads in uniform. . . . Fancy that, soldier, sailor, and two Raff boys, I got the full set!" And Mrs. Green's corrugated

yellow waves became agitated as she giggled foolishly.

Young Smooth detected a swift change in atmosphere without quite getting the hang of it. Stoker muttered, "Now I've seen the ruddy lot—a pub with no beer." But he was beaming, pool cue fingers brushing his thinning hair over the bald patch. Icicle and Lofty had taken to swapping inaudible confidences and sniggering.

The truth being that while Molly Green struck Tony Smooth as motherly, nothing special, the other three were willing to give her the benefit of the doubt as A Bit of All Right, Ta Very Much. They were of an ilk in finding availability the most potent aphrodisiac.

Smooth caught on, after Mrs. Green jiggled away to the kitchen, pledging cocoa even if she couldn't manage beer or spirits. Stoker cocked an eye at the others and spoke softly—for him. "You can try the benches. Play me cards right, I should be in a feather bed, come lights-out."

Outraged and disillusioned, Tony Smooth protested, "But she's doing us a good turn!"

"Just what I'm saying," Stoker purred, doing more hair arrangement. "Keep your nose out, kid. This is grownups' business."

Molly Green returned with mugs, none of them matching, a stale loaf of sawdusty bread, and a tiny cube of margarine. Representing several days of her food rations. It made Smooth all the angrier and more alarmed on her behalf. Sixteen is a grand age for knights-errant.

Yet after a while, as the men munched and swigged and Molly Green chattered compulsively—evidently she'd been living alone for long enough to store months of extremely minute smalltalk—Smooth's dread subsided. He could believe that Molly was a veteran barmaid. She handled Stoker, Icicle, and Lofty superbly, somehow putting them on the plane of friends without advancing their lecherous aims by the thickness of a cigarette paper.

"Afraid of burglars?" she answered Stoker. "Nah, luv. Hector—that's my old man—left me a shotgun. My bedroom's like the bloomin' Tower of London armory. Shotgun by the bed, and I got a kitchen knife *that* long under my pillow." Molly Green spread her arms in an angler's claim. This caused her extensive if not sculpted bosom to curtsy invitingly, but her three potential suitors looked more thoughtful than ardent.

Tony Smooth nodded approv-

ingly. Noting the reaction, Molly twinkled at him conspiratorially. Plainly she might be an amiable ninny, but by the same token, Mrs. Green was determined to sleep alone.

Before she left them, however, Smooth started worrying again. Molly Green was talking about Hector with less than wifely admiration. Typical Jock, she grumbled, dour, canny, grudging. And stupid with it. The pub had been going downhill before Hector tried his luck in the merchant marine, and that was his own fault.

"All it needed was doing up, lick o' paint, nice bit of lino on this bloody stone floor," Molly lectured, gliding along a familiar nagging groove. "Hector couldn't afford it. Not much! All the time he had his silver cups and shields and that, billiards and snooker champion for years, daft old bugger. Worth a hundred quid, easy. Would he sell them? Not Hector! Still sitting in the cupboard there. That's a Jock for you, boys, even if he is my old man and I says it as shouldn't. Too close to spend a hundred quid and make a thousand."

Green as he was—and totally unlarceous, never pinched so much as tuppence from his mum's purse to see a Tom Mix or Charlie Chaplin movie, Tony Smooth insists—it made his

scalp tighten and his blood run cold.

High on grievances, Molly Green babbled on. Smooth wondered whether it was a trick of firelight making Stoker's eyes gleam greedily, and whether the RAF contingent wasn't a little too interested in the cupboard behind the bar. . . .

Picking his moment, he murmured to her, "Shut up about the silver, missus. In front of strangers, get my drift?"

Mrs. Green bit her lip. "Gawd, what a chump I am." She took a heavy iron key from beneath the bar. She sounded painfully stilted when she said, "Talking of silver, I'd better lock the cupboard. No offense, gents, but Hector's mustard on me locking up last thing at night."

She turned the key in the solid oak door, smiling at its click of reassurance. Nobody appeared to take much notice. Stoker was rummaging in his kitbag, Lofty and Icicle absorbed in their cards.

Molly Green patted the cupboard door, flustered embarrassment subsiding. "Need matchsticks to keep my eyes open, boys, so I'm off up the wooden hill. Bring you a nice copper char first thing in the morning, okay? Nighty-night."

They heard her mounting the uncarpeted staircase, and the rattle of a chair being placed

under her bedroom door handle. Stoker stretched until his muscles cracked. "Shame . . . still, fortunes of war, mates. At least we're out of the cold. Now put that bloody light out, let's get some kip."

Tony Smooth was last to sleep. Molly Green had squeezed his hand while saying goodnight—he'd opened the bar parlor door for her—and in doing so, she slipped the cupboard key to him.

When Smooth awoke, it was to find the room in noisy confusion, Mrs. Green weeping and swearing distractedly, Stoker shouting. The famous cupboard's door gaped open and its dusty shelves supported nothing but a can of silver polish and some dusters.

"It was like that when I brung your tea," Molly Green sniveled. "Which one of you done it, rotten, ungrateful bleeder?"

Icicle, old-maidishly adjusting his blue forage cap to the fancied angle, spoke coolly. "Seems simple to me, lady. That door's not been jemmied open, right? And me and Lofty took a gander at the lock. Bit you can see inside is old, rusty . . . no scratches showing, 'twasn't picked." Icicle glanced at Tony Smooth with a strange mixture of pity and respect.

"My laddo there had the key, it's down to him."

Smooth, less defensive than baffled, blurted out, "But the key never left me all night, cross my heart! It was down the front of my underpa—" Blushing crimson, he turned that into a lame, "—in a safe place. I'd have woken up if anyone took it."

Icicle cackled and wagged his head. "I'm not arguing it never left you, Sunshine. You opened the cupboard with it, nicked the stuff, hid it outside for later, and—"

"I never!" cried Smooth. And: "He never did," Molly Green agreed. "Bless him, the kid's not bent. Nor daft, come to think of it. Soon as I gave him the key to hold, *he* couldn't nick the stuff. Stands to reason."

"I would have, in his place," Lofty put in. "Double bluff, see. Well, why not?"

Stoker said, "I can't see it. The kid's no tealeaf, you can tell." A reader of Conan Doyle, the sailor brightened suddenly. "Here, tracks! The stuff can't be far, look for tracks."

But the ground around the Crofters Arms was iron hard from frost. Trooping back in, they found Mrs. Green setting a fresh tray of steaming mugs on the bar. She'd dropped the original wakeup brew on seeing the plundered cupboard.

The two RAF men had been in conference. Icicle suggested, "Maybe we got a pickpocket as well as a straight thief." Stoker flexed his thick fingers at the phrase. Icicle nodded eagerly. "Yuh, it doesn't make sense for the kid to use the key, knowing he'd be prime suspect, right? Me and Lofty saw a stage pickpocket, Fulham Empire, last leave. He could slap you on the back and have your suspenders and watch away, quick as quick and you none the wiser till your trousers fell down. . . . See what I mean?"

Tony Smooth was sure that no pickpocket could have taken and returned the key without waking him. On the other hand, there seemed no other explanation. Either way, Smooth would be a fool to doubt the theory, publicly.

Molly Green sighed and shrugged. "Sorry, boys, but PC Mattheison goes by on his bike about nine o'clock every morning. I'll have to tell him. Hector and his blasted trophies . . . he'll kill me. And he'll be docking next week, I got the letter. No offense, I don't want trouble, but I got to report it or my old man will go potty."

Police Constable Mattheison duly appeared—Stoker and Smooth walked down the pub's derelict garden to signal him—and by mid-morning a

police car had taken the entire party to the nearest large town, for interrogation by the CID.

“That,” Tony Smooth recalls, “is how I discovered my vocation. I mean . . . the Ultimate Pickpocket . . . somebody who didn’t really exist, doing something that never really happened!” At this stage Smooth makes formless, excited, shaping gestures.

“It’s like being a great author or actor or whatever. The con itself was silly, childish even, but it *created* something as well as lifting the silver, sweet as a nut. I can’t explain it, if you’re not bent. I couldn’t hardly wait to pull it for myself—not the Ultimate Pickpocket, but the same line of country.”

The police investigation was a bit of a joke, he says. And for young Smooth, an education. They were fingerprinted—Mrs. Green as well, for elimination purposes—though nobody disputed that all four men had been in the pub or that Smooth had handled the key. Smooth made his first acquaintance with that historic double act, the Tough Skeptic and the Soft Reasonable CID Man. There was a lot of talk, much taking and signing of statements.

Today’s Smooth says, indulgently, that the Ultimate Pick-

pocket could only have worked at that precise time. “It was 1940, we were servicemen with places to go, by order. A hundred quid, which the silver was worth, was big money, but in 1940 we were about to be invaded by Adolf, paratroopers disguised as nuns—you were told to look out for boots beneath the habit—and the Fifth Column. Different world, different priorities.

“The cops told each one of us to own up because they had us bang to rights. That didn’t work. And like I said, the world was about to go up in flames. The silver had to be hidden near the pub and we couldn’t get back to it right away, for obvious reasons connected with Absence Without Leave. The law figured the odds and decided to go for finding the loot before the thief could get leave and come back for it. Behind *that* was the thought that all of us service lads could be dead by summer, or prisoners taking our orders in German; a spot of burglary was sort of academic.

“So a military-police truck turned up to run us to Gaddack Head, and that was the end of it.”

Before leaving the Scottish police station, though, and bidding farewell to poor, confused, wronged Molly Green (“Last time I play Good Samaritaness,

see if it isn't, talk about diabolical liberties with a lady!"), Tony Smooth officially entered his cherished *métier*.

He did it by whispering fewer than twenty words to the person who had set the Ultimate Pickpocket loose in the bar parlor of the Crofters Arms that night. "To show I was less green than cabbage colored, as the saying goes. To prove I'd twigged. The person looked right startled. Then they winked at me, the rascal!"

It was 1953, Coronation Year, before Tony Smooth ran into Molly Green. "She bought me a drink for old times' sake—and for keeping my trap shut."

The thing about Mrs. Green, Smooth explains, is that she only told the truth by accident. "That bit about working in all the Lambeth pubs was kosher, for instance. Molly kept nicking stuff and getting sacked, that's why . . ."

She had not been Hector-of-the-pub's wife, of course. "Simply his fancy piece. He'd picked her up at the 1938 soccer cup final, spun her a line about being a wealthy hotelier. Soon as he went to sea, she legged it off to Glasgow and sold his trophies for the scrap bullion value.

"But it was harder to do a

runner during the war, bags of rules and regulations, I.D. cards and ration books and such. Molly knew Hector would send the law after her. Live for the day was her motto, but his ship never got torpedoed or anything, and time was running out.

"So she decided to get the silver stolen, official, and not by her. Service lads were always getting stranded overnight at Allum Beg Junction, so she was spoilt for choice. The rest was pie-easy. Molly reckoned she was sure none of us would get our collar felt for the job. Not having done it, we wouldn't confess; we couldn't get caught with the loot, she'd saved us that risk, weeks before. Molly felt the only victim was Hector, and he richly deserved some aggravation."

But what of the Ultimate Pickpocket's coup?

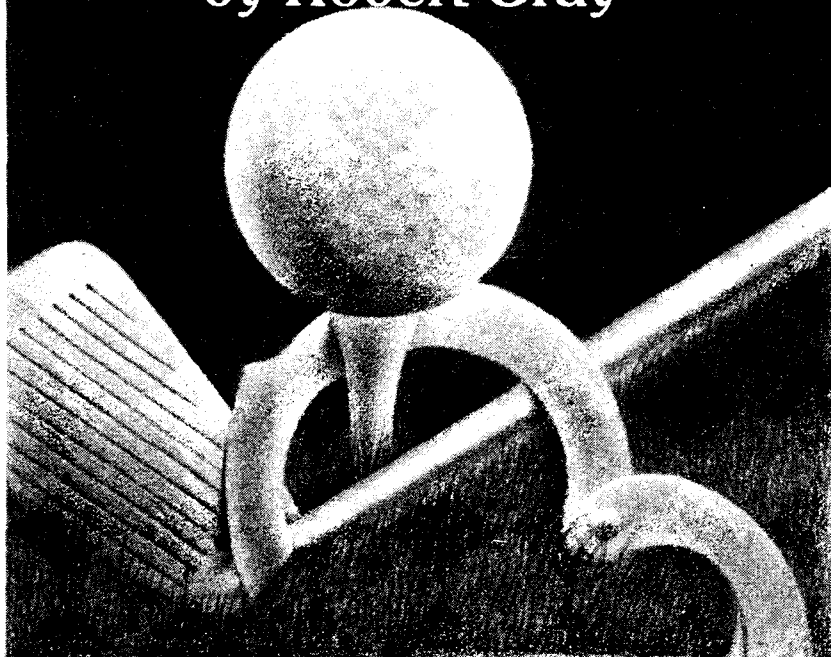
"I said it was childish," Tony Smooth chortles. "Molly crept downstairs at first light, quietly opened the cupboard, then dropped her tray of tea and yelled blue murder so we could all be off to the races.

"Sure she opened it, no key and no trouble. What I whispered to her at the nick was this: 'You *unlocked* that cupboard in front of us all, before you gave me the key!'"

FICTION

To Win at Any Cost

by Robert Gray



On the fifteenth tee, Virginia Crossley stood for a moment and surveyed the terrain. A two hundred and one yard par three, the fairway was a narrow emerald corridor carved from the surrounding pine forest. It ended at a large oval putting green protected by sand traps on either side and deep rough behind. Not the sort of hole one could

Illustration by Barbara Roman

expect to make up strokes on in a tournament situation, she thought. Just surviving it in par would be good enough.

This wasn't a tournament situation, however. Off to one side, Virginia's caddy, a mind reader after all their years together, had already extracted the three wood from her bag. She accepted it, pushed her teed ball deep into the perfect grass, and

took a couple of loosening-up swings. The long club flowed in seemingly effortless arcs around her, its persimmon head like a moon in orbit.

Virginia stepped up to the ball, planting the clubhead just behind it. She picked up the club and wagged it twice in the direction of the green, then settled in her stance with a deep breath. In a smoothly synchronized coiling and uncoiling of her long, lean body, she drove the ball. Its flight began along the right side of the fairway; then, ever so gradually, a slight draw brought it back on course. When it landed, it bounced twice before rolling to a stop on the front fringe of the green.

"Nice ball," said the caddy.

"Thank you. Just give me four of those this weekend," she replied, bending over to pick up her tee.

"Don't be greedy, Gin," said her playing partner, Jackie Phelps, who was taking a proffered club from her caddy.

Though not friends in any sense of the word, the two women often played their practice rounds together. Gin had been a professional for seventeen years and Jackie for only three, but they were both now at the top of their games. Every week the leader board seemed to list them among the top five as a tournament progressed. They fed off this rivalry and it

had made them better players, so they took full advantage of the situation, even in practice.

Jackie followed her own set of preparatory moves. To the non-golfer, they might have looked like a duplication of Gin's, but the knowledgeable eye would notice Jackie's more studied pose over the ball, and the stiffness in her programmed swing. She was six inches shorter than her rival, with long blonde hair held back from her pretty, tanned face by a yellow visor. That face now showed the strain of intense concentration as she prepared to hit, an intensity that had not been apparent in Gin's impassive features, though the results were equally proficient.

At least the results were usually proficient. This time, however, perhaps reaching for extra yardage that wasn't in the club, she pulled her drive straight into the woods along the left side of the fairway. Her caddy marked the point of entry by an out-of-bounds stake at about the hundred and sixty-five yard mark.

Jackie teed up again, took a little more time to get set, and rifled a much better shot down the middle. It kicked left and stopped five yards shy of the sand trap.

While Gin and her caddy walked down the fairway, the other two headed for the woods

to see if Jackie's ball could be found or if, by some stroke of benevolent fate, it had caromed off a tree limb and rolled back in bounds. Jackie was slamming her three wood against the ground as she walked, punishing it for the lousy hit.

"Need some help?" Gin called.

"No, we'll have a quick look. No big deal," Jackie replied just before they disappeared in the underbrush.

Gin had already begun to set her mind in gear for the next shot when she heard a scream. She did not remember starting to run but was suddenly aware of her heart pounding and her breath coming in harsh gasps. With her caddy beside her, she plunged through a row of bushes near the edge of the woods and into a clearing beneath the tall trees.

The forest floor was carpeted with pine needles, upon which sat Jackie's caddy, dazed and holding his hand against the side of his head, where some blood trickled between his fingers. Behind him lay Jackie's three wood. After that first scream, the only other sound had been the moaning of the caddy. Jackie Phelps had vanished.

Laura Cavanaugh was on the telephone in her library, a high-ceilinged Victorian room lit by Tif-

fany lamps and sunlight diffused through four stained glass windows depicting turn-of-the-century horseracing and hunt scenes. The Cavanaughs used it as an office for their informal, unlicensed private investigation service in Saratoga Springs.

Laura replaced the phone in its cradle. She poured two scotch and sodas, then carried them out to the kitchen, where her husband was performing bizarre sacrificial rites upon what had once been a perfectly respectable frozen Long Island duckling.

Henri was rushing back and forth in their large kitchen, from spice cabinet to sink, from sink to stove to butcher block work table they had recently acquired. The focus of all this activity lay in a roasting pan on the table. A forlorn, plucked creature, it was gradually disappearing under accoutrements ranging from orange marmalade to maraschino cherries, from tarragon to dill weed.

"Should I call for dinner reservations now or wait until you're through?" asked Laura as she entered, handing off the drink to her husband as he swept past like a fullback on an off-tackle play.

Henri sipped his drink in mid-stride and set it down near the roasting pan. "You just have no faith in me, my pretty. When

are you going to take my cooking seriously?"

"Maybe when you finally learn how."

Undaunted by the critics, Henri was off again, heading for the refrigerator. He took out a quart of orange juice and approached the duckling. There was an evil gleam in his eye that Laura recognized as the culinary equivalent of Dr. Frankenstein about to bring life to a soulless corpse. He moved toward his experiment with head outthrust, bent at the waist and sporting a mischievous grin on his gaunt face.

"You look like a cross between Groucho Marx and the Galloping Gourmet," teased Laura as she sat on a stool near the table.

Henri raised his free hand and imitated Groucho's classic cigar waving, eyebrow-raised leer as he passed by her. "Now here's a viaduct leading over to the mainland."

It may have been the worst impression of Groucho in comedy annals, but Laura humored him by feeding the appropriate movie line with her best Chico accent. "All right. Why a duck? Why a no chicken?"

"I don't know why a no chicken. I'm a stranger here myself. Who was on the phone?"

"Oh, just an old, old friend from college. Virginia Crossley. Gin we used to call her."

"Name sounds familiar. Big nostalgia session?"

"Kind of. You've probably read her name in the sports pages. She's rather a famous golfer. This week she's playing at a small tournament in Connecticut. She suggested we come down if we get a chance."

"You don't sound too thrilled at the prospect."

"It's not that," Laura said. She took a deep breath, then sipped her drink. "I guess I didn't like the sound of her voice. It was almost as if she were upset about something, but afraid to say what. Like she wanted someone to talk to, but couldn't bring herself to unload on me. After all, it has been twenty years since we saw one another. Maybe it was just my imagination."

Henri looked at his wife, then down at the duckling, which was drowning in a sweet sea of marmalade and orange juice tinged with maraschino blood. He looked up at Laura again. "We could probably have dinner on the road if you wanted to leave tonight."

Laura smiled and nodded. "I think I'd like that. Not that I wasn't dearly looking forward to your . . . whatever you had planned there."

Henri dumped the rest of his scotch in the roasting pan. "Don't you recognize Viaduct à l'Orange when you see it?"

They had called ahead for reservations, settling for a motel on the outskirts of the city when they discovered that both downtown hotels were booked full for tournament week. Since it was past midnight when they arrived, Laura suggested they turn in and contact Gin in the morning.

At seven A.M., they were sitting in a downtown cafe. Henri laboriously chewed his rubber pancakes and insisted he could have done a much better job had he been in charge of the kitchen. Laura listened to his complaints in noble silence.

She had called Gin earlier and arranged a meeting here. Fifteen minutes after their arrival, Virginia Crossley entered the cafe and headed for their table, a newspaper tucked under her arm. Henri thought that she and Laura could have been sisters. It was almost as if their college had been in the business of cloning aristocratic, attractive daughters for the upper class.

Both women had reddish hair, though Gin's was cut shorter. They wore nearly matching mid-length skirts and blazers in complementary shades of burgundy and brown. Their white blouses might have been purchased in the same store. Probably had been. Neither woman used, nor required, much in the way of makeup.

Laura stood when Gin reached their table, and the women embraced. When they were seated, Henri sensed the decades fall from their eyes as they once again became schoolmates. For twenty minutes they reminisced, commented (positively, of course) on respective physical changes, and ran through a mercifully brief and incomplete rendition of Henri's life story. Finally, Laura asked the question they had driven all this way to have answered.

"Gin, I know this is going to sound foolish, but yesterday, on the phone . . . well, I guess this is more than just a social call. I don't know quite how to say it, but you sounded odd to me, almost frightened or . . ."

Gin forced a tight smile. She opened the paper to the sports section, then turned it around so Henri and Laura could see an article she was pointing to. A bizarre kidnapping of one of the other players in the tournament had occurred the day before. A woman named Jackie Phelps was snatched off the course during a practice round. Shep, her caddy, who saw nothing, suffered lacerations but fortunately no concussion when the abductor slugged him from behind. Jackie was taken to a car on Forest Drive, a private road linking Route 20 with Brentwood Country Club. He drove her

around the city for an hour, then released her near the golf course. He was described as a heavy-set man, bald, six feet tall, wearing an ill-fitting brown suit and reeking of cigar smoke. He drove a late-model blue Chevrolet.

"Jackie was my playing partner yesterday," said Gin. She described her tenuous relationship with the victim.

"Maybe we can help, Gin," said Laura when she was finished. "We've dealt with this sort of thing before."

"Then it is true what I've heard about you two. I didn't quite know how to bring up the subject yesterday on the phone. I wasn't sure the rumors were true. And if they were, I didn't know if I had the right to impose."

Laura laughed. "It's all horribly true, Gin. Henri has been such a bad influence on me these past twelve years. When I told you he was a racetrack writer, I neglected to add that that is but half of his profession. He was also a private detective when we first met, but has since given up his license. I'm afraid I've managed to acquire most of his bad habits. We've established something of a discreet investigation service."

Gin was shaking her head. "I'd heard as much through the grapevine. Laura Woodward, never a hair out of place, never

a bad thought, the perfect debutante, now a private eye. Will wonders never cease? But I guess if I can golf away my inherited good breeding, you have every right to sleuth away yours."

Coming from some people this would have sounded like an insult, but Laura knew it was only Gin's way of welcoming her into a club she thoroughly approved of, a club whose members had followed their own paths instead of the ones ordained by their powerful families.

Gin's face betrayed an unexpected emotion: relief. "I'm so very glad to hear this. After we talked yesterday and you said you might accept my invitation, I almost regretted it. I dearly enjoyed our chat, but I would have found it difficult to put on a happy face all weekend after yesterday's events. Do you really think you could help me?"

"Help *you*?" asked Henri. "But I thought it was this Phelps woman who was in trouble."

"Ah, well, I'm afraid we're both under the proverbial gun until the matter is resolved. Prevailing talk around the clubhouse seems to lean toward the theory that I had something to do with the kidnapping. Just wait until the newspapers get hold of that one."

"Why? It makes no sense," said Laura.

“It makes more sense than you might think. Up till this week’s event, I’ve been the leading money winner on the tour, but Jackie’s closing in fast. She’s been playing marvelous golf all summer. If she wins this tournament, she’ll overtake me in the standings. There has been a lot of publicity about her as my heir apparent. The irony is that she can’t help but win the money crown this year. There are still two more tournaments on the schedule, but I have an exhibition tour in Japan beginning next week. So for Jackie’s title to have any validity in her eyes, and the eyes of the press and public—and mine as well, I suppose—it’s felt she must beat me this week head to head.”

“And people think you’d arrange a kidnapping just to take her mind off the competition?” asked Henri incredulously. “How can they believe for a second that it would matter to you? You’ve been on top for so long.”

Gin’s stare answered Henri’s question fluently. She had the same hungry, competitive look he imagined she had possessed right from the beginning. No wonder the debutante’s life had held no allure for her.

“You know we’ll do anything we can to help, Gin,” Laura interceded. “Perhaps if you introduced us to Miss Phelps . . .”

Gin shook her head. “That

would be a bad move. Old friends of mine wouldn’t have much standing in her eyes, I’m afraid. Maybe you can convince her you’re reporters, or dedicated fans.”

Henri smiled. “I’m sure I can call in an old favor somewhere and wrangle press credentials.”

It was arranged that Henri and Laura would follow the women anonymously through their practice round that morning. They arrived at the first tee around nine. Laura was wearing a golf outfit she had purchased in the pro shop, a yellow jersey, powder blue skirt, and yellow sun visor. Henri wore corduroys and a sports shirt that had a small New York Giants emblem over the breast pocket. Laura bought him a Jack Nicklaus sweater to cover the emblem.

Because of the importance of the confrontation between Gin and Jackie, as well as the kidnapping attempt, the regional press was out in force. Newspaper reporters, slickly dressed TV newscasters, and ragged camera crews traveled in a pack with two dozen local citizens along for the sideshow. Henri and Laura mingled.

At every opportunity, a member of the press tried to ask Gin or Jackie a question. Each time they were told by Jackie’s caddy, who wore a hat

that didn't quite cover the bandage on the right side of his head, that no statement would be made during the practice round. A press conference was being arranged for four o'clock. The newshounds persisted through the first nine holes, but most of them jumped ship at the turn and decided to wait out the back nine in the clubhouse.

On the fifteenth tee, Laura was standing beside one of the two course marshals assigned to each hole. Dressed in white blouse, dark blue blazer and skirt, the matronly woman sat in a director's chair near a thin rope fence separating the gallery from the tee area. The rope bordered the right side of the fairway and ended in a semi-circle around the distant green.

"Beautiful day," whispered Laura as they watched Jackie tee up.

"Lovely, I . . ." She hesitated while Jackie hit her tee shot. Both women were down the middle and short of the green. "I dearly hope it stays like this through the weekend."

As everyone left, Laura noticed that Henri had somehow managed to get beyond the rope and was walking side by side with Jackie Phelps down the fairway. They seemed to be engaged in a rather intense conversation.

"What's that guy doing out there? Is that a reporter?" asked

the other marshal, poised with her two-way radio, ready to call in a SWAT team if necessary.

"I believe that's her father," said Laura.

At the green, Gin had chipped five feet short of the pin and Jackie eight feet beyond. While they studied their putts, Henri rejoined the other mortals. He stood near Laura and they talked quietly.

"What was that all about?" she asked.

"Apparently Mrs. Phelps likes older men."

"What?"

"That's what she told me."

"And just how did you happen to be out there in the first place, dearheart?"

"Heard her talking with a marshal about dinner last night. Said she had a lobster *fra diavolo* and wished she had been brave enough to ask the chef how he made it. I jumped into the fray and offered my recipe."

"Oh-oh. If she thought her life was in danger from the kidnapper . . ."

"Funny lady. As a matter of fact, she asked me to join her for dinner tonight. I'm picking her up at the Regency before her press conference. Seems like a nice kid."

While Gin's caddy held the flag stick he had lifted from the cup, the players tried their putts several times, then moved away and hit a few more from various

points on the undulating green, trying to anticipate possible difficulties during the tournament. A half dozen golf balls were on the carpet, in constant motion either toward the hole off putter blades or returning when the caddies kicked them back to the women.

Laura grinned. "So this is goodbye, huh? Adiós, toots, it was nice while it lasted?"

"Undercover is definitely the way to go with this, I think. I told her I was a sports reporter from Albany, which isn't a total lie. Horseracing's a sport and Saratoga's only thirty miles up the road."

"What happens when the conversation turns to golf?"

"Simple. I smile and nod. It always works. Oh, one more thing. Let Gin know what's up. You can be her long lost friend, and I'll be the mysterious stranger."

"Sounds like a plan you'll thoroughly enjoy."

"It's got to be better than spending all my time here reminiscing about the good old days at dear Vassar."

"Bryn Mawr."

"Besides, I can maybe provide a little extra protection for Jackie while I'm hanging around."

"Very noble. Would you like me to move out of the motel? I could sleep in the car."

Henri stifled a laugh. "No

problem. Jackie's hotel is downtown. She won't know anything about us. You sure this is going to be okay with you?"

"Now he asks me."

Laura and Gin decided to pass up the news conference and lunch together away from the country club. Out of the public spotlight, Gin displayed a weary and disconsolate face to her old friend. She drank two daiquiris before they ordered and was sipping a third when the salad arrived.

"It's really getting to me, Laura. This business with Jackie. I should be out on the practice range right now."

"Gin, whatever her troubles may be, they're not your doing. If anyone has cause to be upset, it's Jackie Phelps. Does she have any idea why this happened?"

Gin stared into her drink. "That's something of a delicate subject. She told me today that there were two other incidents recently. In New York she suffered food poisoning. In Atlanta she was nearly run down in a parking lot. She thought they were coincidences until yesterday."

"And now she thinks someone's trying to kill her?"

"No, not at all. She thinks they're trying to intimidate and distract her, keep her from

beating me this week. She says it must be a demented fan of mine, but I can tell she's also thinking it might be me . . . and she's not the only one."

"That's absurd. How can . . ."

"You know how people talk. I've never been what you could call 'one of the girls' in this business. I keep to myself most of the time, and I'm practically a recluse during a tournament. A lot of people resent that attitude. I've also been queen of the ball for a long time. With this sudden challenge to my crown, people naturally suspect I'd do almost anything to gain an advantage. Even hire a thug."

"There must be other suspects."

"I suppose. Jackie has an ex-husband who hasn't been heard from in a long time. They were divorced a couple of years ago, before she made it big on the tour. He showed up this spring, demanding compensation for all the years he supported her as an amateur, even heckled her from the gallery during one tournament. The marshals put a quick stop to that. I haven't seen him since."

"And the other suspects?"

"Well, there's the caddy, Shep. He's reaped some of the benefits from her success, but I think he'd like a bigger piece of the pie. He hovers over her like a mother hen, picking out her

clothes, screening her calls. Things like that."

"Are they lovers?"

Gin laughed. "Oh no. He's hardly Jackie's type. Her taste in men runs a few years older, if you know what I mean."

"So I've heard," said Laura with a raised eyebrow.

As Henri rode up on the elevator to the third floor of the Regency, he was scanning the latest issue of *Golf Monthly*. He'd just picked it up at a newsroom outside the hotel, and was now taking a crash course in the finer points of the game, hoping to learn enough buzz words to get him through this charade.

Already he had stored away such essential tidbits as the need for good leg action on the downswing and follow-through on sand shots. He had also discovered that Jackie was ranked second in Greens-in-Regulation, whatever that meant. When the elevator began to slow its ascent, he was studying an advertisement for a Florida vacation paradise, a full-page collage of sandy beaches, luxury hotels, and tourists playing golf on flawless courses.

He tucked the magazine under his arm. The ancient elevator doors ground slowly open and he stepped out, nearly colliding with Jackie Phelps herself.

Dressed in a long blue robe, her dripping wet hair pasted against her head, she rushed past, screaming, "Stop him!" again and again, running all the way to the end of the corridor, where it veered sharply right toward the rear of the building.

There she stopped. Her shoulders heaved and she was crying. Henri ran over, slowing as he got close so he wouldn't startle her. Jackie turned toward him and nearly collapsed in his arms.

"Thank God! Did you see him?"

"Who Are you hurt?"

She was too upset to speak. Shaking her head, she let him lead her back to her room. A few of the doors along the corridor opened and curious heads peeked out to see what was going on, then quickly closed before they were asked to get involved.

Her suite looked as if it had been leveled by a grenade. The sofa and chairs were overturned, their upholstery slashed and the stuffing pulled out as if somebody had been trying to gut an animal. A coffee table lay top down, one of its legs missing. The marble base of a lamp had been used as a battle-axe against an end table. The top of the bar had been swept clean of everything but the phone, and bottles and glasses,

many of them broken, littered the area. Shards of glass sparkled in the carpet, reflecting sun rays streaming through the window, which was stripped of its drapes and cracked.

In her bedroom, Jackie's clothes closet had been emptied and the contents thrown around the room. A jewelry box was dumped on the heaps of wrinkled clothing, necklaces and rings glittering among the folds.

Henri stood in the center of this devastation. Jackie retreated to the bedroom and closed the door, saying she just couldn't talk yet. He heard her switch on a blowdryer, which drowned out her sobbing.

Tossing his magazine on the floor, Henri began looking around. He peeked in the bathroom, which was still humid from the heat of her shower, the mirrors just beginning to unsteam. The towels were all on their rods, and a bottle of shampoo had spilled in the tub, sending a slow wave of amber gel toward the drain. The sink was covered with bottles and tubes, their caps gathered in a tidy pile near the edge. Two drinking glasses were still wrapped in plastic.

Jackie was brushing out her hair when she emerged from the bedroom ten minutes later. Henri had completed his tentative investigation of the living room, finding nothing that

would be of much help.

She wore a bright yellow sundress that exposed her tanned, freckled shoulders. Its cheery color mocked the serious expression on her face. She had applied makeup skillfully, like an emotional Band-Aid to hide her distress.

"You okay?" Henri asked.

Jackie shrugged and sat on the edge of the overturned sofa. She reached under the coffee table for her cigarettes, offered one to Henri.

"Thanks, no. Gave 'em up," he said.

She found her lighter, used it, then took a deep drag, blowing the smoke out in a shaky exhalation. She reached into a large pocket on her dress, took out an envelope, and gave it to Henri. Her hand was trembling. "This was left outside my door an hour ago. I was going to show it to you."

The note inside had cutout letters pasted on it in classic ransom note style, though lacking a hostage or demands. It read, simply, "I will make your life HELL." The letters of the last word looked like balloons, large and bright yellow.

Jackie was looking around the room, shaking her head. "Why?"

"Same guy, you think? The note, I mean, and this . . ."

"Oh yes . . . oh yes. Same one as yesterday."

"What happened in here? I mean . . . what happened?"

She took a deep breath, crushed out her cigarette in an ashtray on the floor. "I . . . I was in the shower, with the bathroom door shut. I was running late. I knew you'd be here any minute, so I left a note saying you should just come right in. Dumb, huh?"

Henri shrugged.

"That jerk must have thought I'd be in the shower longer than I was. When I shut off the water, I heard something crash out here, threw on my robe and . . ."

She wiped away another tear with her sleeve. ". . . I came out, and he split. Like an idiot, I chased after him. Don't know what I'd have done if he'd stopped."

Henri walked over to the window and looked down at the street. A Cadillac was pulling up out front, and the doorman welcomed the new arrivals with a courteous tip of his cap. "I'd better call the police."

"Okay. But tell them we'll be at the press conference. They can send somebody over there to talk with me. We're late as it is. I've got some things to get off my chest."

"Was anything stolen?" Henri asked as he dialed.

Jackie glanced at the bedroom, with its tangled heaps of clothing and jewelry. She shook

her head. "I can see a seven hundred dollar ring from here. It's not my money she's after. It's my sanity."

"She?"

Jackie didn't answer. Henri gave the police her message. They were cooperative, as he had found cops often were around celebrities. Then he called the country club. Disclosing as little of what had just happened as he could get away with, he left word that they were on their way with a big story. That might keep the press sober for a little while longer.

"Can we get out of here?" she said. "I'm really sorry you had to be dragged into this, Henri."

"Don't worry about it. Maybe I can help."

"You already have. Just by being here . . . Oh, remind me to tell the front desk to get cleaning people up here after the police have done their thing. I don't want to come back to this. And do you think we could have dinner someplace quiet after the conference, somewhere away from the madness?"

"Could definitely be arranged," said Henri, trying to put a mischievous twinkle in his eye. He settled for a squint.

Laura and Gin were having a drink in the lounge of Gin's hotel when the first reporter showed up. As soon as his eyes

had adjusted to the dark, he headed straight for their table.

"'Scuse me, Miss Crossley," he said, his breath coming in gasps, as if he'd just run all the way from the country club. "Jackie Phelps was late for her press conference. The same guy who kidnapped her yesterday just trashed her hotel room while she was in it, and she says that in the past couple of weeks she was almost run down and her food was poisoned. Plus she got a threatening letter today, too. She says she knows who hired this goon; says it's somebody who's got a lot to gain from her emotional breakdown, this weekend especially. We asked if that meant you, but she said she wasn't naming names. Any comment?"

Gin was still trying to decipher the early part of this frenzied monologue. Laura stepped in as buffer. "Please leave us alone. I'll call the manager if I have to. Miss Crossley isn't interested in tabloid journalism."

The reporter ignored her. "Jackie Phelps thinks a professional thug was hired to harass her. You know anything about that, ma'am?"

Gin sipped her drink and stared away from them. Her face looked hard and emotionless.

"Miss Crossley, about these accusations . . ."

"What accusations?" Laura

demanded. "You said Jackie didn't mention names."

"Listen, lady. Would you mind? The others are going to be here any second."

"Others?" asked Gin absently, as if talking to herself.

"Come on, Gin. Let's get out of here," said Laura. She stood to shield Gin from the reporter as they made their retreat.

"You'll have to face us sooner or later," he called as they left the room.

Laura ushered Gin to the elevator. They took it up to her fourth floor room. Gin made them another drink. Laura phoned the desk and asked that the press be kept at bay. Then she walked over to a window, watched the reporters' vans and cars pull up out front. They looked like an invading army, gathering in huddled groups near the entrance to plot attack strategies. Laura searched the mob for Henri, but couldn't find him.

Jackie hadn't spent much time with the reporters. She'd confined her remarks to a brief statement, knowing she would be facing a thousand questions from the police immediately afterward.

"Please, Henri, let's get away from this circus," she said, after the last cop had asked his last question and the last reporter had finally figured out what

she meant by "no further comment at this time."

"Where to?"

"Anywhere. Some of the girls were talking about a place out by the lake called Gratanos. How about there?"

"Sure."

Gratanos wasn't crowded. Henri and Jackie were given, as requested, a secluded table. Although they were served a feast, much of it went uneaten. An enormous antipasto was followed by fettucine Alfredo, veal Parmigiana, homemade cannoli, and fresh espresso.

Jackie picked at her food and smoked one cigarette after another. Henri knew she was upset and found himself not eating out of sympathy. They did, however, manage to drink nearly two bottles of wine.

Gin fell asleep crying. In the privacy of her room, away from center stage, where she was known as the Ice Queen because of her tightly reined emotions in competition, she surrendered to those same emotions.

Laura closed the drapes against the evening sun that was heading toward glorious setting over a distant hill. She took an empty glass from Gin's hand and covered her with an afghan. Then she left a note saying she would call later.

The immediate problem was

getting back to her motel, since Henri had commandeered their car. She called for a taxi.

As her driver sped across the city, Laura noticed a large neon sign on a rooftop, blinking REGENCY HOTEL with irritating insistence against the darkening sky. She remembered that that was where Jackie was staying, and asked her driver to change course.

Standing in the Regency lobby, she considered asking at the front desk for help, but knew instinctively that she had to start elsewhere, that they would politely brush off her inquiries. She walked across the lobby toward the elevator as if she belonged in the building. No one took notice. She slipped down a nondescript, poorly lit corridor on a hunch and found what she had been looking for, a door with a faded brass plate marked "Head Custodian."

The small room was furnished with three tables, a couple of stools, and four green metal lockers. On a table near the door, a pile of ragged magazines lay next to an open box of stale looking doughnuts and a filthy percolator. The other two tables were pushed together against the far wall to form a long workbench, on which pieces of a broken chair had been laid out like bones.

A middle-aged man, wearing blue overalls and workshirt,

was daubing glue on a piece of the chair. He glanced up at Laura, then reached for an oily rag to wipe his hands.

"Help you, ma'am?" he asked, moving toward her. Laura backed away. Sensing her unease, he stopped in the center of the room. Laura glanced away from him to stare at a magazine on the table next to her. This month's *Bon Appetit*. Henri had just received his the other day.

"Do you cook?" she asked, knowing it was a senseless way to begin this particular conversation, but seeing it as an out, a way of starting.

He laughed, then broke into a cough that ended with a drawn-out wheeze. From his pants pocket he took out a crumpled pack of Camels. "Nah. Chambermaids save all them things from the wastebaskets and drop 'em off down here. I'll read most anything."

Now that some contact had been established, Laura began her subtle negotiations while the man cupped his hands over a wooden kitchen match to light up. Within minutes she had convinced him to show her the stuff from Jackie's room. He said the police had told him to remove everything that might have been touched by the intruder and store it where they could inspect it later. They had already dusted it for fingerprints, and he'd heard one of

them say that the guy had obviously worn gloves.

His cooperation, of course, did not come from the power of Laura's argument but from her purse. For fifty dollars, she had bought his eternal friendship.

They took the service elevator down to the basement level. He led her to a dark corner where the furniture was being stored temporarily, covered with a dirty plastic shroud.

"As I say, I haven't chucked anything out yet. After the cops, the insurance'll want to have a look, I imagine."

Laura began inspecting the pile of stuff as soon as he turned back the plastic. The custodian, having already pocketed his fifty, stood nearby, obviously impatient. She didn't let him bother her. Carefully she separated the items while running through a checklist in her mind, trying to remember what the contents of a hotel suite would be, what had been brought down here, what had not. She even found a plastic garbage bag filled with chunks of broken glass. She kept asking the custodian questions, and his patience had to be fortified with another twenty.

In the lobby once again, she found one of those old wooden telephone booths near the entrance and went in to call another cab. Just as she pulled the door shut behind her, Henri

and Jackie entered the lobby, or rather they staggered into it. Henri had some trouble with the revolving door, then tripped over the shadow cast by a large potted fern.

Laura held the phone away from her ear and watched them. Money had already been deposited and a mechanical voice was making unintelligible demands. Henri and Jackie disappeared into the elevator.

Henri felt nauseated. He was not a wine drinker by profession. He had just remembered that important fact. Jackie was clutching his arm. He didn't know if that meant affection or fear of collapse on her part.

He could not recall driving to the hotel from Gratanos. Then he realized that Jackie had been behind the wheel, but that didn't make him feel any better.

When the elevator doors opened on Jackie's floor, Henri stepped out tentatively, his mushy brain half expecting he would be run down again by a hysterical female.

Somehow they managed to find her door. Jackie fumbled through her purse for keys, then handed them to Henri. He had to concentrate like a safe-cracker on the task of getting the door open. After a half dozen failed attempts, he fi-

nally succeeded and the gates were thrown open.

In his drunken state, there seemed to have been sorcery involved in the room since they had left that afternoon. It was as if somebody had rewound a videotape of the destruction. There wasn't a speck of dust, nor a chair out of place, nor so much as a sock on the floor. The window had been replaced and the bar restocked. The sofa was tight against the wall, the coffee table upright and polished, displaying at one end a clean ashtray and at the other a fan-like spread of magazines. The *Golf Monthly* Henri had left behind earlier lay sandwiched between *Newsweek* and *People*.

It was almost, but not quite, enough to make him sober. It seemed to have just that effect on Jackie. She decided they both could use a nightcap. He declined the offer. She insisted, and led him by the hand to the sofa. He resisted. She scolded him for being an old prude.

Jackie went over to the bar. Henri picked up his magazine and said he had to leave. She turned, her eyes showing a peculiar mixture of surprise, drunkenness, and disappointment.

She said he had to stay. She was pouting.

He said no again.

She was angry. She approached him, noticed the mag-

azine. "Did you just take that off the coffee table?"

"Yeah. I forgot it this afternoon. I have to go now, Jackie. I'm . . ."

"No, you can't have that. It's mine!" she yelled, grabbing the magazine from him, her voice that of a furious child.

"I hate golf anyway," shouted Henri.

"Get out! Get the hell out of here!" she screamed. "I thought you'd be fun."

"A lot of people make that mistake," he muttered as she pushed him toward the door.

He appreciated the helping hand.

Henri remembered being in the elevator. If he wasn't mistaken, by the time it reached the lobby, he was sitting. He thought he might be dying. When the doors slid open, he fully expected to be confronted with the fires of hell. Instead, he saw a radiant angel of mercy.

Laura was sitting on the edge of the bed when Henri came to. The morning sun seemed unbearably harsh, but he didn't complain. Stoicism was the best defense for a hangover. Pretend it doesn't hurt, and anyone who might want to nag you will have no ammunition.

Stoicism.

He sat up to accept the hot

black coffee, and the pain splintered his skull. "Arrrgh!"

So much for stoicism.

He reached for the cup like a beggar, with both hands. Relieved of it, Laura returned to her armchair and picked up her own cup. She stared at him with that bemused smile she always reserved for these special occasions.

"Who am I?" he asked. "I think I've got amnesia. Do I know you, ma'am?"

"I am your queen, sir. We met in a pub. I wish to thank you for a splendid evening, but I'm afraid you are to be executed at high noon. It is, alas, the custom."

"Thank God. At least I'll get rid of this head. It's a terrible burden to bear."

"Mmm, I can just imagine."

Two cups later, they were ready to compare notes. Henri went first, since they both assumed his mind would be the more vulnerable of the two. Laura opened a notepad. As he confessed his transgressions of the past twenty-four hours, she occasionally scribbled something down. He wondered if she was adding up his demerits.

When he was finished, she told him about her day. He looked a bit sheepish when she described his entrance to the Regency lobby, and shortly thereafter her discovering him melting into a pool of nothing-

ness on the elevator floor.

"Not my finest moment," he confessed, and they laughed.

After some further questions on both sides, Laura had a couple of pages of evidence and speculation. They decided that it was time to make some arrangements.

There was a Pro-Am tournament that afternoon, a preliminary contest one day before the real action would begin. Jackie won it with her partner, a local plumbing and household wares magnate. Gin did not play particularly well, but the reporters were surprised at her composure and courtesy toward them while on the course. Whenever she passed near the media herd, she smiled pleasantly and shook her head as if hearing a silent punch line to a joke told at their expense. The barrage of questions that assaulted her all day was deflected by that same sweet smile and maddening silence.

Jackie had been given a plainclothes police escort. Henri, although he had patched things up with her and secured the dinner date she thought she still owed him because of last night's fiasco, was relegated to the press corps. Laura, on the other hand, walked the fairways with Gin in another group.

Henri and Jackie were shown

to the same table at Gratanos. The seclusion was necessary. Waiters were already fending off a half dozen reporters anxious to sit within earshot.

When they were seated, Henri ordered drinks and studied the menu. Jackie folded and unfolded her napkin.

"Why is this table set for four?" she asked.

"Some friends of mine said they might stop by."

"Not reporters . . ."

"No."

"Henri . . . about last night. You have every right to be miffed. I was pretty smashed, you know. I behaved like a brat. Forgive me?"

Henri nodded and smiled. "I wasn't exactly an innocent victim myself, though I can't remember too much."

Lighting a cigarette, she laughed nervously and asked him how he had liked the Pro-Am. He offered belated congratulations. She began describing an errant sand shot, and he wondered if she was going to ask him about her follow-through. He was relieved to see Laura and Gin enter the restaurant. Jackie was less pleased, stopping in mid-sentence.

"What's she doing here?"

"Oh, those are my friends, you know, the ones I was telling you about?"

"Then I'm leaving," said

Jackie, pushing her chair back as the two women arrived. Laura stepped in behind her and blocked the retreat.

"Please, not just yet, dear. Don't let's be antisocial."

"Who the hell are you?" asked Jackie.

"I just happen to be this elderly gentleman's wife."

Jackie looked over at Henri, who shrugged. "What? You never told me you were married. I swear, lady, I don't mess with . . . If you think I knew . . ."

Laura and Gin took their seats and waited for Jackie's apologies to run their course. ". . . so you see it was all totally innocent. Nothing happened. . . . Wait a minute. Gin, is this another one of your harassments? You must be getting desperate. And you saw how well your plan worked today on the course."

Gin rested her cheek in her hand and stared at Jackie. Again that inscrutable smile she had displayed all afternoon returned, for just a moment. She said nothing in reply.

Jackie looked at Laura, then Gin, then Henri. "There's something else going down here, isn't there?"

"You should know," said Henri.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean," said Laura, "the game is over. You lose, honey."

Jackie opened her mouth to argue, but Laura waved her silent. "Don't bother, Jackie. You made mistakes. Thanks to some digging of my own, not to mention some relentless investigative work by my husband, we've managed to stumble on enough to end your little charade."

"You're crazy, I haven't . . ."

"But you have. Shall I lay it out? I'd love to. Let me tell you a story, purely hypothetical, of course. A promising young golfer, we'll call her Jackie Phelps just to pull a name out of the air, needed some kind of edge against a fading, but still potent, veteran. We can call her Gin Crossley. Jackie arranged a series of incidents aimed at herself, which would make it look like Gin might be resorting to desperation tactics. Public and media sympathy naturally goes to the beautiful young star, not the coldhearted Ice Queen. And everyone's predictably amazed that Jackie can still compete despite all her problems. Meanwhile, Gin's concentration is decimated by the strain of constant hounding by the press, driving her into seclusion and depression."

Jackie shook her head, as if she were being told an incredibly farfetched, tedious fairy tale about people she didn't know.

"Problem. Gin has this nosy friend named Laura who can't

quite accept this scenario. I listen to my husband describe your room after it was broken up. I have already looked at the damaged items taken from there and made a small list of missing items, things that were not destroyed. I can't help but wonder why, if this room has been so thoroughly demolished, the telephone was left undisturbed on the bar when everything else was swept off. Then I recall that, when I was in the lobby phone booth last night, not only was I nicely secluded from view, but I had a perfect view of the entrance. It occurs to me that perhaps there was an accomplice in the lobby who phoned you when my husband arrived, long after the room had been disrupted. That way you could jump in and out of the shower and time your run past the elevator with Henri's arrival. What do you think so far?"

Jackie lit another cigarette and looked to Henri for help. She didn't get it.

"Then Henri tells me about the silly little battle you two had last night over that golf magazine. I wonder to myself, could there be more to it than mutual petulance? I return to the hotel this morning and visit my friend the custodian, to whom the chambermaids donate all magazines thrown in room wastebaskets. For a small fee he allows me to inspect his

collection, and what do you suppose I find?"

Laura reached inside her purse and pulled out a *Golf Monthly*, which she opened to an advertisement for a Caribbean vacation. Though part of the ad had been cut out, in bright yellow balloon letters there remained "—O SUNSHINE, GOODBYE WINTER."

"You see, that really was Henri's magazine you took from him last night. After you pasted up the fake threatening letter and tossed this copy in the wastebasket, your chambermaid gave it to the custodian instead of throwing it out. When it apparently turned up again last night, you panicked."

"You call this evidence?" asked Jackie, though traces of moisture were becoming visible in the corners of her eyes.

"Who was the accomplice, Jackie?" asked Henri.

She crushed out her cigarette, took a deep breath, and fought tears. "It got out of hand, that's all. Shep knew how hard I have to work at my game and the pressures I'm under every damn day. He said life would sure be a lot simpler if we could bring Gin down a notch instead of my continually driving myself to reach her level. . . . I guess, when the stakes got so high this last month, I grabbed at straws. Shep arranged the incidents and I went along,

even to the point of conking him during the kidnapping. . . . Whether you believe it or not, Gin, I am sorry. I don't expect forgiveness or anything. Shep said don't worry, but . . . you could never understand what it's like out there for someone like me. . . . It's all so easy for you, so effortless."

Gin, her hand still resting against her cheek, was shaking her head sadly. Henri was surprised to see that her eyes were hard and unsympathizing. Despite all that had happened, he somehow thought she might understand her younger, less gifted colleague's desperation.

But then he saw something else. There was tension in Gin's eyes, as if she were holding emotions tightly in harness. He thought that maybe Jackie was mistaken in thinking the mask Gin showed to the world was also the inner woman. He read pain in those eyes, subtly disguised hurt.

He sensed that, in her own way, Gin had worked and sacrificed every bit as hard for what she had achieved; that she resented Jackie's accusations that she had not.

And Henri knew it was this "other" Gin who was the person Laura called her friend, the person she had consoled yesterday while everyone else was assuming the worst.

"Did you call the police?"

Jackie asked Laura, avoiding Gin's cold stare.

"No. You will do so now."

Jackie didn't seem surprised.

Laura continued. "And you will hold another press conference. What story you fabricate this time is up to you. As long as you clear Gin of all suspicion and end the rumors, she will not, against my advice, press charges. Of course, you'll also have to make arrangements with the Regency to compensate them for their damages."

Jackie nodded again. She accepted some tissues from Laura and dabbed at her eyes. Then she pushed back her chair. She glanced one final time at Gin, trying to communicate her regrets.

If the message got through, Gin did not acknowledge it. She stared impassively into space.

When Jackie was gone, the waiter arrived with the drinks Henri had ordered. Laura took a sip of Jackie's rum and Coke. She offered some to Gin.

"No, thanks, Laura. I can't drink with the tournament beginning tomorrow. Disturbs my

concentration, which isn't something I can just switch off and on. That was apparent this afternoon. Fact is, I'd better be getting back to the hotel. Have to wrap myself in a cocoon and prepare for tomorrow. But if you can bear with my unforgivable manners and stay around until Sunday, I promise that, win, lose, or draw, I will treat you both to the very best dinner this town can manage."

"We'd like that," said Laura.

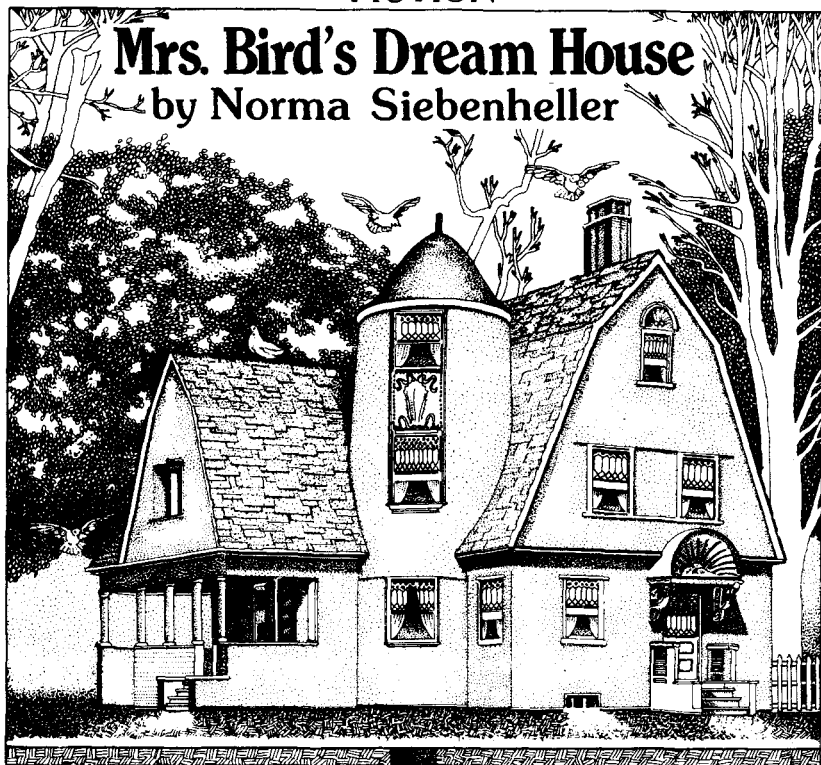
"And thank you, thank you so much. You really were marvelous. I don't know what else to say. You saved my life, in a manner of speaking."

Gin stood and walked around the table to kiss them. Then she moved across the dining room. A reporter rose from his chair to ask about the mysterious conference, but she walked past him as if he weren't there. Henri thought she would have walked right through him had he been so bold as to step into her path.

Laura turned to Henri. She raised her glass and clinked it against his. Their eyes met and smiles creased their faces.

Mrs. Bird's Dream House

by Norma Siebenheller



It was just my luck to be alone in the office when Mrs. Bird came in. I own the business—Jenny Hanson Real Estate—and I have two part-time salespeople, but they are both teachers and don't come in until three. I man the phones until then and do my paperwork during the midday hours when things are generally pretty quiet.

Of course as long as I'm there the door is always open for walk-in customers. They are few and far between, but occasionally we're pleasantly surprised. We have our share of nuts, too—which brings me back to Mrs. Bird.

She came in about eleven o'clock, a tiny, fluttery little woman well suited to her name. Pretty old, I thought, to be looking for a house, though I suspected she might be wanting to trade down, get rid of a big barn of a place and buy something small and manageable. But I was wrong. Actually she never mentioned selling any-

Illustration by Kurt Wallace

thing, then or later. She only wanted to buy. And she was very specific about it, right from the beginning.

"You have, I believe, a small Victorian cottage for sale," she said as she sat down next to my desk. "Painted yellow with white trim, a little turret on the side with a tiny room at the top of it, steep sloping roofs, all slate, and a white picket fence around the garden . . ."

I searched my brain for the house she meant. We had several Victorians listed, but none of them matched the description she gave. They were all considerably larger, to start with. I showed her photos of them, but she shook her head emphatically, saying, "No, no! This is a small house, only a story and a half. It's got five rooms, six if you count the turret. Living room, dining room, kitchen, two bedrooms . . . the most lovely country garden . . . mahogany paneling on the first floor, and gas lighting . . ."

I asked her the address of the cottage, since she seemed to know it so well, but she replied that she didn't know—that no one had ever told her. I thought this a curious reply, but of course I didn't say so.

"Do you mean that it isn't listed yet?" she demanded. I assured her that that was indeed the case, unless, of course, it was being handled through another agency.

She said that was impossible, in a tone so definitive that it didn't occur to me until later to wonder how she could be so sure.

"Oh well, then," she said at last, "I suppose I'm a little premature. I was so certain—but you'll have it. I know that, so I'll stop in from time to time to check. I definitely want it, you see. It was never possible—until now—but I've got to have it."

"Let me take your phone number, Mrs. Bird," I said, "and I'll notify you the minute it's available."

But she didn't want to do that. She'd give me neither phone nor address. That should have turned me off right there, but in my business the customer is always right, so I just accepted her idiosyncrasies and let it go at that. If she wants to be anonymous, I thought, so be it.

In my own mind I doubted she'd be back. I forgot even to mention her to Sally Reeves and Paul Morris when they came in that afternoon.

I told my husband at dinner, though.

"Maybe she lives in some old age home or something," he suggested, "and is embarrassed about it. Poor thing's probably a little

tetched. One thing's sure, there'll be no sale—you'll probably never see her again."

I had to agree. But it was only two days later that the listing came in. The house was just as she'd described it, and when I went out to Allison Street to see it and meet the owners, Jim and Aggie Mulvane, I mentioned Mrs. Bird to them.

"Obviously she must have overheard you discussing the upcoming sale," I said. "At the library, or the supermarket—"

The Mulvanes looked puzzled. "Impossible," said Aggie. "We didn't know we were going to be selling until yesterday. Jim was just notified of his transfer—we're going to San Francisco—yesterday morning. I didn't know until last night. The promotion's effective in thirty days, so we called you right away this morning. We figured we didn't have any time to waste."

A wild coincidence, then. But I wondered about it just the same.

Of course I couldn't hold the house for Mrs. Bird. I had no guarantee she'd ever show up again, or that she would really have money to spend if she did.

I took down the particulars and noted that the asking price, ninety-five thousand, was very reasonable, considering the excellent condition of the house and its desirable neighborhood. I said so, suggesting that the Mulvanes might want to start a little higher and come down to ninety-five as a final figure.

"We're in a hurry," said Jim. "It should sell fast at this price, and that's what we want."

I agreed that it would and left to tell Sally and Paul, stopping to take a couple of Polaroids on my way out. They were ecstatic when they saw the pictures. This would be an easy sale.

"I've got someone who'll snap this up," Sally said, ruffling the cards in her Rolodex. "Here," she said finally, "Mr. and Mrs. Peter Ashley. Loved the Madison Avenue Victorian when I showed it the other day but said it was too big. There are only the two of them, no children. I'll take them up to see it this evening if they can make it." She began dialing, and Paul and I went to work on the details of a closing we had scheduled for the following morning.

The Ashleys, as predicted, fell in love with the house immediately and signed a binder on the spot. By noon the next day a contract had been drawn up and signed, and they turned over ten thousand dollars to the Mulvanes as a down payment. Life should always be this easy, I reflected. Closing was set for March eighth, only one month away.

Three days later Mrs. Bird returned, sat down next to my desk, and said, "Well?"

"You should have left me your phone number," I said evenly. "The house did indeed come onto the market, and we sold it to the very first couple that saw it. I'm sorry—"

"But that's impossible!" she cried, her wrinkled little face flushing with anger. "I told you I would buy it! How much did they pay? I'll give five thousand more."

Quietly I explained to her that the Ashleys had a contract, and that the Mulvanes couldn't legally sell to anyone else now even if they wanted to. "Why don't you let us look for another home for you?" I suggested.

"It has to be that house," she answered. "I *will* have it. The Ashleys won't keep it long. . . . I'll be back."

"I'll suggest again that you leave a telephone number if you're truly interested," I told her. "If you're going to rely on ESP like you did the last time, you're bound to be disappointed."

She threw me a venomous look, as if I'd insulted her grandmother.

"I've never—had—a telephone," she said, and walked back out into the street.

The sale went through as planned, and after that I forgot all about Mrs. Bird, as the spring rush was upon us. I had to take on another part-timer to handle the increased business, and May and June just flew by. I hardly had time even to read the papers, I was so busy.

As a matter of fact I missed the paper entirely on July seventh, and so it wasn't until the following afternoon, when Sally came in, that I found out the Ashleys were dead.

"Carbon monoxide poisoning," she told me. "Came from a faulty gas heater, so the paper said. The thing I wonder is, why did they have the heater going in July?"

"Maybe it was for hot water," I replied. But something about it made me uneasy. I could have sworn the house had had a new hot water heater, an electric one. Oh well, if the police were satisfied, I guessed I ought to be. I just thought how ironic fate was . . . how it could just as easily have been the Mulvanes dead—or even old Mrs. Bird—instead of the Ashleys. I got very depressed thinking about the chance nature of it all.

And then Mrs. Bird came in, newspaper in hand, her face beaming with satisfied pleasure.

"Well!" she announced, "didn't I tell you! Now I *will* get the house. Just let me know how much you want for it."

I have ceased being surprised at the stupidity of some people, but I'll admit to being—well, bemused, I suppose—by her calm assumption that she could now have what she wanted. Her thinking was that of a small child.

I patiently explained that the house was not mine to sell.

"The Ashleys probably had wills," I said, "and they've no doubt left their estate to someone, a sister or cousin or the like. Just because they had no children doesn't mean there are no heirs."

That seemed to surprise her, and she reflected a minute. "After all these years," she muttered. Then, brightening, "But you will sell it eventually, won't you? I mean the heirs will sell?"

I said that was possible but not certain; it would depend on who the heirs were, and where they lived. . . . She wasn't pleased with my answer and began pouting noticeably again.

To snap her out of it I said, "Look, Mrs. Bird, maybe you ought to be glad you didn't get the house last spring—it would've been you that was dead of carbon monoxide, instead of the Ashleys."

I wasn't prepared for her laugh: it shook the room. She was still laughing when she gathered up her things and walked out the door.

She didn't say so this time, but I knew she'd be back.

By the time she returned, about two weeks later, the whole staff knew all about her and Paul had dubbed her Mrs. Birdbrain. She was becoming a nuisance, and we were convinced she couldn't really buy the house even if it did come up for sale again. Her clothing, we now noticed, was quite worn and old fashioned, and she always appeared outside on foot, never in a car. She wasn't listed in the phone book (I'd looked, I admit it), and she wasn't a resident in the town's only old age home, according to my Aunt Margaret, who lived there herself. That meant she must be a boarder somewhere—an unlikely state for someone prepared to pay a hundred thousand or more for a house.

I even asked my brother-in-law, who's vice president of our local bank, if she had an account there, and he said she didn't. She just seemed to materialize every few weeks and then vanish again, like morning mist.

So whenever she came into the office I brushed her off rather quickly with a "No news, Mrs. Bird" or some similar comment.

And that was true, actually—as far as I knew, no move had been made to sell the house, and I still didn't know who'd inherited it.

Then one day in September I was out in Allison Street again to look at a new listing, and I noticed a plumbing and heating truck parked in front of the Ashley house.

"I see there's activity down the street," I said to my new client, Genevieve Snow. "At the Ashley place."

Yes, she replied, a nephew had inherited it and was planning to move in with his wife and baby. They were, of course, having a new heating system installed, but otherwise the house seemed to be in perfect shape. Even the flower garden had bloomed, despite the fact that no one had tended it since spring. "It's as if the house were just waiting for its next occupant," she concluded.

I finished my business and wondered how I would break the news to Mrs. Bird on her next visit. She'll have to get used to it this time, I said to myself. And maybe she'll stop bothering us so much, too. I wouldn't be sorry to see the last of her.

As I passed the Ashley place again, I thought how beautiful a house it truly was. I didn't blame the old lady—the house certainly did have charm. It was a gingerbread cottage, a dollhouse, a fairy-tale illustration, especially with the old fashioned perennial garden in full glory. Who else around here has hollyhocks? I wondered. I almost began to wish I owned the place myself.

Mrs. Bird was livid when she heard that the nephew was planning to live there himself.

"This could go on and on, like before," she said angrily. "It could be off the market for years, and I'll never be able . . ."

"You can't blame people, can you, for keeping it for long periods of time? After all, it is a darling house. No wonder everyone wants to live there, it's perfect."

That seemed to cheer her a little, and for a minute I thought maybe she'd come to her senses and get over this obsession. Yet I could swear I heard her muttering to herself as she opened the door to leave. I couldn't hear exactly what she was saying, but it sounded like the same word over and over.

Perfect . . . perfect . . . perfect . . .

Each time I took a client out to the new Allison Street listing, I'd notice a change or two at the Ashley place. First it was a new mailbox, then a planting of copper chrysanthemums out by the road. But in early October I saw a different sight:

three carpets, rolled and left at the curb for the garbage men to carry away.

"Sewer backup," said Mrs. Snow when I asked. "The young Ashleys were devastated. The carpets were new, but even after cleaning they couldn't get rid of the smell, so they had to throw them away. On top of the oven explosion it was a cruel blow, that's for sure."

Oven explosion? I hadn't heard about that.

It had occurred the previous week, she said. The pilot light must have gone out, and there was a gas buildup. When Kevin Ashley walked into the room with a cigarette, there was a terrific bang. He wasn't hurt, but the wall oven was destroyed.

I again thought of Mrs. Bird and how she ought to be grateful, not angry, that all these troubles weren't hers.

I was even more shocked, though, on my next visit to Allison Street, to see a roofer in front of the Ashleys' house, covering the slate tiles with asphalt shingles.

Kevin Ashley was out on the front lawn, watching with a glum look on his face. On an impulse I stopped and introduced myself.

"That was such a lovely slate roof," I said. "What happened? Leaks?"

"It's the oddest thing," he responded. "I thought it was slate, too. It certainly *looked* like slate. But see—" he pointed to a low point near the front door where the steep roof pitched almost to the ground—"it's a sham. It's like Styrofoam. The wonder is it ever kept rain out at all. It's leaked like a sieve for the last month."

I could hardly believe it. I'd felt the tiles in that same place the first day I ever saw the house. It's so unusual to see a slate roof, and I'd never touched one before. The tiles were cold and hard—stony—then, but they were soft and porous today. I could penetrate the surface with my fingernail: in fact, when I did so, a small piece broke off in my hand. I slipped it into my jacket pocket, shaking my head in amazement.

"The next thing we have to tackle is the paneling," he went on. "Uncle Pete thought it was mahogany, but mahogany wouldn't bow like that."

The great sheets of wood covering the living and dining room walls, it seemed, were pulling away from their supports, and even cracking in places. Several pictures had come crashing to the floor, and the wavy walls were disorienting, to say the least.

"I'll pull it off," he continued. "Maybe I can use it to finish the basement some day, if I cut it into narrow strips. But we'll just

have to refinish the walls beneath, and hope for the best. I can't afford to repanel, no way. This house is draining me as it is."

What a shame, I thought—this pleasant young man must have been thrilled to find himself a homeowner at such a young age; he wasn't more than twenty-five, I guessed—yet here he was, faced with one problem after another. I noticed that the lawn was browning, too, something it hadn't done in the heat of summer and which was almost incomprehensible now, in the cool sunny days of fall. The bright flowers had withered and died overnight, it seemed. The house was a far cry from what it had been only six weeks before.

Paul Morris told me the next installment, learned through the Lions Club, where he and young Ashley were both members.

"When they got the paneling off," he related, "they discovered the walls underneath were covered with an awful slime. Smelled to high heaven. They scrubbed it off, but it built up again. They've done it three times now and still it's coming back. And to top it off, apparently the baby is allergic to it—to the mold spores or something. He's developed asthma. Kevin says he doesn't know how they're gonna solve it, or if they ever can."

Just about that time winter hit us hard, with temperatures slipping below zero several nights and hardly ever rising above twenty for weeks. This halted the Ashley baby's allergy problems, but according to Paul it brought a host of new troubles. The water pipes froze and burst during the worst of it, and several of the upstairs windows had spontaneously shattered, apparently from the intense cold.

"You'd be shocked," he went on. "No more little dream cottage. It's a shambles. Mrs. Bird should see it now—she'd be relieved she didn't get it after all."

Kevin and his family held out until late February, but then another cold snap and its attendant ills caused him to throw in the towel. When the call came to my desk that day, I have to admit I wasn't surprised. I was really expecting it. He was ready to sell.

"We're so disappointed," Kevin told me. "It was such a pretty house, and I'd begun to research its history. It was built in 1905, you know—sort of late for its style. People named Avis built it. They were to move in in May but didn't actually come until July because of family problems—their little girl died of diphtheria the day before they were to take possession. So who knows, maybe the curse goes back a long time. But they lived here a long time, until

the late twenties, and then their other daughter inherited it. She had been a baby in 1905. She and her husband held it until ten years ago, when they died. Mrs. Mulvane was their granddaughter. I got in touch with the Mulvanes, you know—she said that although they'd never had the problems we've had, the house had always had odd noises, things falling off the mantel, bells ringing in the night—poltergeist stuff. They kind of laughed it off, but I could tell she believed it. She said it was benevolent, though. Benevolent! Not if it's causing the things I've gone through. Anyway, I've had enough. We'll take the first offer we get. I just want to get out of here—fast."

Ah, Mrs. Bird, I thought, where are you now that we need you? For who else would buy this wreck of a home but—a nut?

She flew in less than a week later.

We hadn't seen her all winter, but on that day in early March she looked exultant, as if she'd finally achieved a goal.

"Your ESP must be working," I said, and she visibly flinched. But then she smiled and said, "I knew he'd sell it. . . . I'll give him forty thousand for it, as is."

A hard bargain, but Kevin really had no other choice. In addition to the disasters with the plumbing and paneling, every appliance in the house was on the blink, and a rotten smell pervaded the site even in the lingering winter cold. I couldn't bear to think of what it might be like in spring or summer. But that would be Mrs. Bird's lookout—if she could last that long against the house's evident curse.

The sale was consummated in a week—Mrs. Bird paid in used hundred dollar bills—and the Ashleys moved out gratefully, putting behind them a year they hoped quickly to forget. Mrs. Bird brought in nothing but a small suitcase of clothes and a toothbrush, I was told. I hoped she also carried a large measure of optimism, for it seemed to me she'd need it, and then some.

What a surprise I had, then, when I drove by one day in May to see the garden blooming riotously again and the little house sparkling in the bright spring sun. Mrs. Bird was sitting on the porch in a wicker armchair reading a novel by Edith Wharton. She looked the picture of contentment, and I couldn't help stopping to see the fantastic transformation.

"How did you do it so fast?" I exclaimed when she showed me inside. For there it was at its Victorian best again, the floors cleanly carpeted, mahogany paneling again covering the walls. A fresh

cherry pie cooled on the kitchen table, and white fringed curtains billowed in the breeze. It was a miracle.

"Even the smell is gone," I remarked, to which she responded that there had never been any smell, she didn't know what those young people had been complaining about—

"I don't know what they were thinking," she went on. "Why, did you know they'd torn perfectly good paneling off these walls and stored it in the cellar?" She'd had a carpenter put it right back on as soon as she moved in. Unfortunately she'd had to buy new rugs, as they had thrown the others away.

"Where did you find all the period furniture?" I asked. I knew the Ashleys had had modern things.

"Oh, it was around," she said enigmatically. "Tucked in corners . . ."

I had to admit she seemed to fit the house better than its previous occupants, and she was so clearly happy that my earlier dislike of her melted away. "You do belong here, Mrs. Bird," I remarked as I was leaving. "You were right about that—right to persevere. I hope you'll continue to be happy here."

"Oh I will, my dear," she cooed. "I've been—well, preparing—for this, for a long time."

As we stepped outside, she reached up to that low corner of the roof, where Kevin Ashley had had to cover the porous roofing material in order to keep out the rain.

"Can you imagine," she said, touching the shiny black tiles, "that young man covered this beautiful slate roof with *asphalt*? Of all the—Why the very first thing I had the carpenter do, even before he restored the paneling, was pull off all those cheap shingles and let this roof do its job again! Who ever heard of covering up a good slate roof?"

Who indeed? I felt the smooth hard stone again as I bade her goodbye, and even now as I write this I can feel it still . . . there's no mistaking slate, after all. I can see it in my mind as clearly as I can see this little piece of Styrofoam that I took from my jacket pocket.

SOLUTION TO THE AUGUST "UNSOLVED":

There was only one Upwright in the party.

MYSTERY CLASSIC

A Double-Barrelled Detective Story

by Mark Twain



Illustration by Richard Crist

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Part One

*We ought never to do wrong
when people are looking*

I

The first scene is in the country, in Virginia; the time, 1880. There has been a wedding, between a handsome young man of slender means and a rich young girl—a case of love at first sight and a precipitate marriage; a marriage bitterly opposed by the girl's widowed father.

*A
wedding*

Jacob Fuller, the bridegroom, is twenty-six years old, is of an old but unconsidered family which had by compulsion emigrated from Sedgemoor, and for King James's purse's profit, so everybody said—some maliciously, the rest merely because they believed it. The bride is nineteen and beautiful. She is intense, high-strung, romantic, immeasurably proud of her Cavalier blood, and passionate in her love for her young husband. For its sake she braved her father's displeasure, endured his reproaches, listened with loyalty unshaken to his warning predictions, and went from his house without his blessing, proud and happy in the proofs she was thus giving of the quality of the affection which had made its home in her heart.

*The
bride*

The morning after the marriage there was a sad surprise for her. Her husband put aside her proffered carresses, and said:

*The
wife's
surprise*

"Sit down. I have something to say to you. I loved you. That was before I asked your father to give you to me. His refusal is not my grievance—I could have endured that. But the things he said of me to you—that is a different matter. There—you needn't speak; I know quite well what they were; I got them from authentic sources. Among other things he said that my character was written in my face; that I was treacherous, a dissembler, a coward, and a brute without sense of pity or compassion: the 'Sedge-

*The
Sedge-
moor
trade-
mark*

moor trademark,' he called it—and 'white-sleeve badge.' Any other man in my place would have gone to his house and shot him down like a dog. I wanted to do it, and was minded to do it, but a better thought came to me: to put him to shame; to break his heart; to kill him by inches. How to do it? Through my treatment of you, his idol! I would marry you; and then— Have patience. You will see."

From that moment onward, for three months, the young wife suffered all the humiliations, all the insults, all the miseries that the diligent and inventive mind of the husband could contrive, save physical injuries only. Her strong pride stood by her, and she kept the secret of her troubles. Now and then the husband said, "Why don't you go to your father and tell him?" Then he invented new tortures, applied them, and asked again. She always answered, "He shall never know by my mouth," and taunted him with his origin; said she was the lawful slave of a scion of slaves, and must obey, and would—up to that point, but no further; he could kill her if he liked, but he could not break her; it was not in the Sedgemoor breed to do it. At the end of the three months he said, with a dark significance in his manner, "I have tried all things but one"—and waited for her reply. "Try that," she said, and curled her lip in mockery.

*A
fiend's
frenzy*

That night he rose at midnight and put on his clothes, then said to her, "Get up and dress!"

She obeyed—as always, without a word. He led her half a mile from the house, and proceeded to lash her to a tree by the side of the public road; and succeeded, she screaming and struggling. He gagged her then, struck her across the face with his cowhide, and set his bloodhounds on her. They tore the clothes off her, and she was naked. He called the dogs off, and said:

*The
husband
disap-
pears*

"You will be found—by the passing public. They will be dropping along about three hours from now, and will spread the news—do you hear? Goodbye. You have seen the last of me."

He went away then. She moaned to herself:

"I shall bear a child—to *him*! God grant it may be a boy!"

The farmers released her by and by—and spread the news, which was natural. They raised the country with lynching intentions, but the bird had flown. The young wife shut herself up in her father's house; he shut himself up with her, and thenceforth would see no one. His pride was broken, and his heart; so he wasted away, day by day, and even his daughter rejoiced when death relieved him.

Then she sold the estate and disappeared.

II

In 1886 a young woman was living in a modest house near a secluded New England village with no company but a little boy about five years old. She did her own work, she discouraged acquaintanceships, and had none. The butcher, the baker, and the others that served her could tell the villagers nothing about her further than that her name was Stillman, and that she called the child Archy. Whence she came they had not been able to find out, but they said she talked like a Southerner. The child had no playmates and no comrade, and no teacher but the mother. She taught him diligently and intelligently, and was satisfied with the results—even a little proud of them. One day Archy said,

"Mamma, am I different from other children?"

"Well, I suppose not. Why?"

"There was a child going along out there and asked me if the postman had been by and I said yes, and she said how long since I saw him and I said I hadn't seen him at all, and she said how did I know he'd been by, then, and I said because I smelt his track on the sidewalk, and she said I was a dum fool and made a mouth at me. What did she do that for?"

The young woman turned white, and said to herself, "It's a birthmark! The gift of the bloodhound is in him." She snatched the boy to her breast and hugged him passionately, saying, "God has appointed the way!" Her eyes were burning with a fierce light and her breath came short and quick with excitement. She said to herself: "The puzzle is solved now; many a time it has been a mystery to me, the impossible things the child has done in the

*The
new life*

*A
lonely
child*

*The
scent
of the
blood-
hound*

*Testing
the
blood
gift*

dark, but it is all clear to me now." She set him in his small chair, and said:

"Wait a little till I come, dear; then we will talk about the matter."

She went up to her room and took from her dressing table several small articles and put them out of sight: a nail file on the floor under the bed; a pair of nail scissors under the bureau; a small ivory paper knife under the wardrobe. Then she returned, and said:

"There! I have left some things which I ought to have brought down." She named them, and said, "Run up and bring them, dear."

The child hurried away on his errand and was soon back again with the things.

"Did you have any difficulty, dear?"

"No, Mamma; I only went where you went."

During his absence she had stepped to the bookcase, taken several books from the bottom shelf, opened each, passed her hand over a page, noting its number in her memory, then restored them to their places. Now she said:

"I have been doing something while you have been gone, Archy. Do you think you can find out what it was?"

The boy went to the bookcase and got out the books that had been touched, and opened them at the pages which had been stroked.

The mother took him in her lap, and said:

*An odd
child*

"I will answer your question now, dear. I have found out that in one way you are quite different from other people. You can see in the dark, you can smell what other people cannot, you have the talents of a bloodhound. They are good and valuable things to have, but you must keep the matter a secret. If people found it out, they would speak of you as an odd child, a strange child, and children would be disagreeable to you, and give you nicknames. In this world one must be like everybody else if he doesn't want to provoke scorn or envy or jealousy. It is a great and fine distinction which has been born to you, and I am glad; but you will keep it a secret, for Mamma's sake, won't you?"

The child promised, without understanding.

All the rest of the day the mother's brain was busy with

excited thinkings; with plans, projects, schemes, each and all of them uncanny, grim, and dark. Yet they lit up her face; lit it with a fell light of their own; lit it with vague fires of hell. She was in a fever of unrest; she could not sit, stand, read, sew; there was no relief for her but in movement. She tested her boy's gift in twenty ways, and kept saying to herself all the time, with her mind in the past: "He broke my father's heart, and night and day all these years I have tried, and all in vain, to think out a way to break his. I have found it now—I have found it now."

*Uncanny
plans*

When night fell, the demon of unrest still possessed her. She went on with her tests; with a candle she traversed the house from garret to cellar, hiding pins, needles, thimbles, spools, under pillows, under carpets, in cracks in the walls, under the coal in the bin; then sent the little fellow in the dark to find them; which he did, and was happy and proud when she praised him and smothered him with caresses.

*Further
tests*

From this time forward life took on a new complexion for her. She said, "The future is secure—I can wait, and enjoy the waiting." The most of her lost interests revived. She took up music again, and languages, drawing, painting, and the other long-discarded delights of her maidenhood. She was happy once more, and felt again the zest of life. As the years drifted by she watched the development of her boy, and was contented with it. Not altogether, but nearly that. The soft side of his heart was larger than the other side of it. It was his only defect, in her eyes. But she considered that his love for her and worship of her made up for it. He was a good hater—that was well; but it was a question if the materials of his hatreds were of as tough and enduring a quality as those of his friendships—and that was not so well.

*A heart
too soft*

The years drifted on. Archy was become a handsome, shapely, athletic youth, courteous, dignified, companionable, pleasant in his ways, and looking perhaps a trifle older than he was, which was sixteen. One evening his mother said she had something of grave importance to say to him, adding that he was old enough to hear it now,

and old enough and possessed of character enough and stability enough to carry out a stern plan which she had been for years contriving and maturing. Then she told him her bitter story, in all its naked atrociousness. For a while the boy was paralyzed; then he said:

"I understand. We are Southerners; and by our custom and nature there is but one atonement. I will search him out and kill him."

*Worse
than
death*

"Kill him? No! Death is release, emancipation; death is a favor. Do I owe him favors? You must not hurt a hair of his head."

The boy was lost in thought a while; then he said:

"You are all the world to me, and your desire is my law and my pleasure. Tell me what to do and I will do it."

*Jacob
Fuller*

The mother's eyes beamed with satisfaction, and she said: "You will go and find him. I have known his hiding place for eleven years; it cost me five years and more of inquiry, and much money, to locate it. He is a quartz miner in Colorado, and well-to-do. He lives in Denver. His name is Jacob Fuller. There—it is the first time I have spoken it since that unforgettable night. Think! That name could have been yours if I had not saved you that shame and furnished you a cleaner one. You will drive him from that place; you will hunt him down and drive him again; and yet again, and again, and again, persistently, relentlessly, poisoning his life, filling it with mysterious terrors, loading it with weariness and misery, making him wish for death, and that he had a suicide's courage; you will make of him another wandering Jew; he shall know no rest any more, no peace of mind, no placid sleep; you shall shadow him, cling to him, persecute him, till you break his heart, as he broke my father's and mine."

"I will obey, Mother."

*Money
and
disguises*

"I believe it, my child. The preparations are all made; everything is ready. Here is a letter of credit; spend freely, there is no lack of money. At times you may need disguises. I have provided them; also some other conveniences." She took from the drawer of the typewriter table several squares of paper. They all bore these typewritten words:

\$10,000 REWARD.

It is believed that a certain man who is wanted in an Eastern State is sojourning here. In 1880, in the night, he tied his young wife to a tree by the public road, cut her across the face with a cowhide, and made his dogs tear her clothes from her, leaving her naked. He left her there, and fled the country. A blood-relative of hers has searched for him for seventeen years. Address, post office. The above reward will be paid in cash to the person who will furnish the seeker, in a personal interview, the criminal's address.

*The
first
placard*

"When you have found him and acquainted yourself with his scent, you will go in the night and placard one of these upon the building he occupies, and another one upon the post office or in some other prominent place. It will be the talk of the region. At first you must give him several days in which to force a sale of his belongings at something approaching their value. We will ruin him by and by, but gradually; we must not impoverish him at once, for that could bring him to despair and injure his health, possibly kill him."

She took three or four more typewritten forms from the drawer—duplicates—and read one:

....., 18

To Jacob Fuller:

You have days in which to settle your affairs. You will not be disturbed during that limit, which will expire at M., on the of You must then MOVE ON. If you are still in the place after the named hour, I will placard you on all the dead walls, detailing your crime once more, and adding the date, also the scene of it, with all names concerned, including your own. Have no fear of bodily injury—it will in no

*The
second
placard*

*Moving
on*

circumstances ever be inflicted upon you. You brought misery upon an old man, and ruined his life and broke his heart. What he suffered, you are to suffer.

"You will add no signature. He must receive this before he learns of the reward-placard—before he rises in the morning—lest he lose his head and fly the place penniless."

"I shall not forget."

"You will need to use these forms only in the beginning—once may be enough. Afterward, when you are ready for him to vanish out of a place, see that he gets a copy of *this* form, which merely says:

MOVE ON. You have days.

"He will obey. That is sure."

III

Extracts from Letters to the Mother.

*Close to
his prey*

DENVER, April 3, 1897.

*A
pleasing
person-
ality*

I have now been living several days in the same hotel with Jacob Fuller. I have his scent; I could track him through ten divisions of infantry and find him. I have often been near him and heard him talk. He owns a good mine, and has a fair income from it; but he is not rich. He learned mining in a good way—by working at it for wages. He is a cheerful creature and his forty-three years sit lightly upon him; he could pass for a younger man—say thirty-six or thirty-seven. He has never married again—passes himself off for a widower. He stands well, is liked, is popular, and has many friends. Even I feel a drawing toward him—the paternal blood in me making its claim. How blind and unreasoning and arbitrary are some of the laws of nature—the most of them, in fact! My task is become hard now—you realize it? you comprehend, and make allowances?—and the fire of it has cooled, more than I like to confess to myself. But I will

carry it out. Even with the pleasure paled, the duty remains, and I will not spare him.

And for my help, a sharp resentment rises in me when I reflect that he who committed that odious crime is the only one who has not suffered by it. The lesson of it has manifestly reformed his character, and in the change he is happy. He, the guilty party, is absolved from all suffering; you, the innocent, are borne down with it. But be comforted—he shall harvest his share.

SILVER GULCH, May 19.

I placarded Form No. 1 at midnight of April third; an hour later I slipped Form No. 2 under his chamber door, notifying him to leave Denver at or before eleven fifty the night of the fourteenth.

Some late bird of a reporter stole one of my placards, then hunted the town over and found the other one, and stole that. In this manner he accomplished what the profession call a "scoop"—that is, he got a valuable item, and saw to it that no other paper got it. And so his paper—the principal one in the town—had it in glaring type on the editorial page in the morning, followed by a Vesuvian opinion of our wretch a column long, which wound up by adding a thousand dollars to our reward on the paper's account! The journals out here know how to do the noble thing—when there's business in it.

At breakfast I occupied my usual seat—selected because it afforded a view of Papa Fuller's face, and was near enough for me to hear the talk that went on at his table. Seventy-five or a hundred people were in the room, and all discussing that item, and saying they hoped the seeker would find that rascal and remove the pollution of his presence from the town—with a rail, or a bullet, or something.

When Fuller came in he had the Notice to Leave—folded up—in one hand, and the newspaper in the other; and it gave me more than half a pang to see him. His cheerfulness was all gone, and he looked old and pinched and ashy. And then—only think of the things he had to listen to! Mamma, he heard his own unsuspecting friends describe him with epithets and characterizations drawn

*The
warning*

*The
"scoop"*

from the very dictionaries and phrasebooks of Satan's own authorized editions down below. And more than that, he had to *agree* with the verdicts and applaud them. His applause tasted bitter in his mouth, though; he could not disguise that from me; and it was observable that his appetite was gone; he only nibbled; he couldn't eat. Finally a man said:

"It is quite likely that that relative is in the room and hearing what this town thinks of that unspeakable scoundrel. I hope so."

Ah, dear, it was pitiful the way Fuller winced, and glanced around scared! He couldn't endure any more, and got up and left.

*He sells
out*

During several days he gave out that he had bought a mine in Mexico, and wanted to sell out and go down there as soon as he could, and give the property his personal attention. He played his cards well; said he would take forty thousand dollars—a quarter in cash, the rest in safe notes; but that as he greatly needed money on account of his new purchase, he would diminish his terms for cash in full. He sold out for thirty thousand dollars. And then, what do you think he did? He asked for *greenbacks*, and took them, saying the man in Mexico was a New Englander, with a head full of crotchets, and preferred greenbacks to gold or drafts. People thought it queer, since a draft on New York could produce greenbacks quite conveniently. There was talk of this odd thing, but only for a day; that is as long as any topic lasts in Denver.

*Sticking
to his
trail*

I was watching, all the time. As soon as the sale was completed and the money paid—which was on the eleventh—I began to stick to Fuller's track without dropping it for a moment. That night—no, twelfth, for it was a little past midnight—I tracked him to his room, which was four doors from mine in the same hall, then I went back and put on my muddy day-laborer disguise, darkened my complexion, and sat down in my room in the gloom, with a gripsack handy, with a change in it, and my door ajar. For I suspected that the bird would take wing now. In half an hour an old woman passed by, carrying a grip; I caught the familiar whiff and followed, with my grip, for it was Fuller. He left the hotel by a side entrance, and at

*Dis-
guised
as a
woman*

the corner he turned up an unfrequented street and walked three blocks in a light rain and a heavy darkness, and got into a two-horse hack, which, of course, was waiting for him by appointment. I took a seat (uninvited) on the trunk platform behind, and we drove briskly off. We drove ten miles, and the hack stopped at a way station and was discharged. Fuller got out and took a seat on a barrow under the awning, as far as he could get from the light; I went inside, and watched the ticket office. Fuller bought no ticket; I bought none. Presently the train came along, and he boarded a car; I entered the same car at the other end, and came down the aisle and took the seat behind him. When he paid the conductor and named his objective point, I dropped back several seats, while the conductor was changing a bill, and when he came to me I paid to the same place—about a hundred miles westward.

*On the
train*

From that time for a week on end he led me a dance. He traveled here and there and yonder—always on a general westward trend—but he was not a woman after the first day. He was a laborer, like myself, and wore bushy false whiskers. His outfit was perfect, and he could do the character without thinking about it, for he had served the trade for wages. His nearest friend could not have recognized him. At last he located himself here, the obscurest little mountain camp in Montana; he has a shanty, and goes out prospecting daily; is gone all day, and avoids society. I am living at a miner's boarding house, and it is an awful place: the bunks, the food, the dirt—everything.

*Living
in a
shanty*

We have been here four weeks, and in that time I have seen him but once; but every night I go over his track and post myself. As soon as he engaged a shanty here I went to a town fifty miles away and telegraphed that Denver hotel to keep my baggage till I should send for it. I need nothing here but a change of army shirts, and I brought that with me.

SILVER GULCH, June 12.

The Denver episode has never found its way here, I think. I know the most of the men in camp, and they have never referred to it, at least in my hearing. Fuller doubt-

*Fuller
feels
safe*

*Drooping
and
forlorn*

less feels quite safe in these conditions. He has located a claim, two miles away, in an out-of-the-way place in the mountains; it promises very well, and he is working it diligently. Ah, but the change in him! He never smiles, and he keeps quite to himself, consorting with no one—he who was so fond of company and so cheery only two months ago. I have seen him passing along several times recently—drooping, forlorn, the spring gone from his step, a pathetic figure. He calls himself David Wilson.

I can trust him to remain here until we disturb him. Since you insist, I will banish him again, but I do not see how he can be unhappier than he already is. I will go back to Denver and treat myself to a little season of comfort, and edible food, and endurable beds, and bodily decency; then I will fetch my things, and notify poor Papa Wilson to move on.

DENVER, *June 19.*

*They
are all
sorry*

They miss him here. They all hope he is prospering in Mexico, and they do not say it just with their mouths, but out of their hearts. You know you can always tell. I am loitering here overlong, I confess it. But if you were in my place you would have charity for me. Yes, I know what you will say, and you are right: if I were in *your* place, and carried your scalding memories in my heart—

I will take the night train back tomorrow.

DENVER, *June 20.*

*Hunting
the
wrong
man*

God forgive us, Mother, we are hunting the *wrong man*! I have not slept any all night. I am now waiting at dawn, for the *morning* train—and how the minutes drag, how they drag!

This Jacob Fuller is a *cousin* of the guilty one. How stupid we have been not to reflect that the guilty one would never again wear his own name after that fiendish deed! The Denver Fuller is four years younger than the other one; he came here a young widower in '79, aged twenty-one—a year before you were married; and the documents to prove it are innumerable. Last night I talked with familiar friends of his who have known him from the day of his arrival. I said nothing, but a few days from now

I will land him in this town again, with the loss upon his mine made good; and there will be a banquet, and a torch-light procession, and there will not be any expense on anybody but me. Do you call this "gush"? I am only a boy, as you well know; it is my privilege. By and by I shall not be a boy any more.

SILVER GULCH, *July 3.*

Mother, he is gone! Gone, and left no trace. The scent was cold when I came. Today I am out of bed for the first time since. I wish I were not a boy, then I could stand shocks better. They all think he went west. I start tonight, in a wagon—two or three hours of that, then I get a train. I don't know where I'm going, but I must go; to try to keep still would be torture.

*Gone
and
left no
clue*

Of course he has effaced himself with a new name and a disguise. This means that *I may have to search the whole globe to find him*. Indeed it is what I expect. Do you see, Mother? It is *I* that am the wandering Jew. The irony of it! We arranged that for another.

*The
hunter
hunted*

Think of the difficulties! And there would be none if I only could advertise for him. But if there is any way to do it that would not frighten him, I have not been able to think it out, and I have tried till my brains are addled. "If the gentleman who lately bought a mine in Mexico and sold one in Denver will send his address to" (to whom, Mother?), "it will be explained to him that it was all a mistake; his forgiveness will be asked, and full reparation made for a loss which he sustained in a certain matter." Do you see? He would think it a trap. Well, anyone would. If I should say, "It is now known that he was not the man wanted, but another man—a man who once bore the same name, but discarded it for good reasons"—would that answer? But the Denver people would wake up then and say "Oho!" and they would remember about the suspicious greenbacks, and say, "Why did he run away if he wasn't the right man?—it is too thin." If I failed to find him he would be ruined there—there where there is no taint upon him now. You have a better head than mine. Help me.

I have one clue, and only one. I know his handwriting. If he puts his new false name upon a hotel register and

does not disguise it too much, it will be valuable to me if I ever run across it.

SAN FRANCISCO, *June 28, 1898.*

*A close
miss*

You already know how well I have searched the States from Colorado to the Pacific, and how nearly I came to getting him once. Well, I have had another close miss. It was here, yesterday. I struck his trail, *hot*, on the street, and followed it on a run to a cheap hotel. That was a costly mistake; a dog would have gone the other way. But I am only part dog, and can get very humanly stupid when excited. He had been stopping in that house ten days; I almost know, now, that he stops long nowhere, the past six or eight months, but is restless and has to keep moving. I understand that feeling! and I know what it is to feel it. He still uses the name he had registered when I came so near catching him nine months ago—"James Walker"; doubtless the same he adopted when he fled from Silver Gulch. An unpretending man, and has small taste for fancy names. I recognized the hand easily, through its slight disguise. A square man, and not good at shams and pretences.

*The
aging
criminal*

They said he was just gone, on a journey; left no address; didn't say where he was going; looked frightened when asked to leave his address; had no baggage but a cheap valise; carried it off on foot—a "stingy old person and not much loss to the house." "*Old!*" I suppose he is, now. I hardly heard; I was there but a moment. I rushed along his trail, and it led me to a wharf. Mother, the smoke of the steamer he had taken was just fading out on the horizon! I should have saved half an hour if I had gone in the right direction at first. I could have taken a fast tug, and should have stood a chance of catching that vessel. She is bound for Melbourne.

HOPE CANYON, CALIFORNIA,
October 3, 1900.

You have a right to complain. "A letter a year" is a paucity; I freely acknowledge it; but how can one write when there is nothing to write about but failures? No one can keep it up; it breaks the heart.

I told you—it seems ages ago, now—how I missed him at Melbourne, and then chased him all over Australasia for months on end.

Well, then, after that I followed him to India; almost *saw* him in Bombay; traced him all around—to Baroda, Rawal-Pindi, Lucknow, Lahore, Cawnpore, Allahabad, Calcutta, Madras—oh, everywhere; week after week, month after month, through the dust and swelter—always approximately on his track, sometimes close upon him, yet never catching him. And down to Ceylon, and then to— Never mind, by and by I will write it all out.

I chased him home to California, and down to Mexico, and back again to California. Since then I have been hunting him about the state from the first of last January down to a month ago. I feel almost sure he is not far from Hope Canyon; I traced him to a point thirty miles from here, but there I lost the trail; someone gave him a lift in a wagon, I suppose.

I am taking a rest, now—modified by searchings for the lost trail. I was tired to death, Mother, and low-spirited, and sometimes coming uncomfortably near to losing hope; but the miners in this little camp are good fellows, and I am used to their sort this long time back; and their breezy ways freshen a person up and make him forget his troubles. I have been here a month. I am cabining with a young fellow named “Sammy” Hillyer, about twenty-five, the only son of his mother—like me—and loves her dearly, and writes to her every week—part of which is like me. He is a timid body, and in the matter of intellect—well, he cannot be depended upon to set a river on fire; but no matter, he is well liked; he is good and fine, and it is meat and bread and rest and luxury to sit and talk with him and have a comradeship again. I wish “James Walker” could have it. He had friends; he liked company. That brings up that picture of him, the time that I saw him last. The pathos of it! It comes before me often and often. At that very time, poor thing, I was girding up my conscience to make him move on again!

Hillyer’s heart is better than mine, better than anybody’s in the community, I suppose, for he is the one friend of the black sheep of the camp—Flint Buckner—and the

*Chased
over
the
world*

*Sammy
Hillyer*

*The
black
sheep*

*A man
of
misery*

only man Flint ever talks with or allows to talk with him. He says he knows Flint's history, and that it is trouble that has made him what he is, and so one ought to be as charitable toward him as one can. Now, none but a pretty large heart could find space to accommodate a lodger like Flint Buckner, from all I hear about him outside. I think that this one detail will give you a better idea of Sammy's character than any labored-out description I could furnish you of him. In one of our talks he said something about like this: "Flint's a kinsman of mine, and he pours out all his troubles to me—empties his breast from time to time, or I reckon it would burst. There couldn't be any unhappier man, Archy Stillman; his life has been made up of misery of mind—he isn't near as old as he looks. He has lost the feel of reposefulness and peace—oh, years and years ago! He doesn't know what good luck is—never has had any; often says he wishes he was in the other hell, he is so tired of this one."

IV

*No real gentleman will tell the naked
truth in the presence of ladies*

*Fine
days
and
words*

It was a crisp and spicy morning in early October. The lilacs and laburnums, lit with the glory-fires of autumn, hung burning and flashing in the upper air, a fairy bridge provided by kind Nature for the wingless wild things that have their homes in the treetops and would visit together; the larch and the pomegranate flung their purple and yellow flames in brilliant broad splashes along the slanting sweep of the woodland; the sensuous fragrance of innumerable deciduous flowers rose upon the swooning atmosphere; far in the empty sky a solitary oesophagus slept upon motionless wing; everywhere brooded stillness, serenity, and the peace of God.

October is the time—1900; Hope Canyon is the place, a silver mining camp away down in the Esmeralda region. It is a secluded spot, high and remote; recent as to discovery; thought by its occupants to be rich in metal—a year or two's prospecting will decide that matter one way

or the other. For inhabitants, the camp has about two hundred miners, one white woman and child, several Chinese washermen, five squaws, and a dozen vagrant buck Indians in rabbitskin robes, battered plug hats, and tin-can necklaces. There are no mills as yet; there is no church, no newspaper. The camp has existed but two years; it has made no big strike; the world is ignorant of its name and place.

*A new
camp*

On both sides of the canyon the mountains rise wall-like, three thousand feet, and the long spiral of straggling huts down in its narrow bottom gets a kiss from the sun only once a day, when he sails over at noon. The village is a couple of miles long; the cabins stand well apart from each other. The tavern is the only "frame" house—the only house, one might say. It occupies a central position, and is the evening resort of the population. They drink there, and play seven-up and dominoes; also billiards, for there is a table, crossed all over with torn places repaired with court-plaster; there are some cues, but no leathers; some chipped balls which clatter when they run, and do not slow up gradually, but stop suddenly and sit down; there is part of a cube of chalk, with a projecting jag of flint in it; and the man who can score six on a single break can set up the drinks at the bar's expense.

Flint Buckner's cabin was the last one of the village, going south; his silver claim was at the other end of the village, northward, and a little beyond the last hut in that direction. He was a sour creature, unsociable, and had no companionships. People who had tried to get acquainted with him had regretted it and dropped him. His history was not known. Some believed that Sammy Hillyer knew it; others said no. If asked, Hillyer said no, he was not acquainted with it. Flint had a meek English youth of sixteen or seventeen with him, whom he treated roughly, both in public and private, and of course this lad was applied to for information, but with no success. Fetlock Jones—name of the youth—said that Flint picked him up on a prospecting tramp, and as he had neither home nor friends in America, he had found it wise to stay and take Buckner's hard usage for the sake of the salary, which

*A sour
creature*

*Salary,
bacon
and
beans*

*Afraid
to quit*

was bacon and beans. Further than this he could offer no testimony.

Fetlock had been in this slavery for a month now, and under his meek exterior he was slowly consuming to a cinder with the insults and humiliations which his master had put upon him. For the meek suffer bitterly from these hurts; more bitterly, perhaps, than do the manlier sort, who can burst out and get relief with words or blows when the limit of endurance has been reached. Goodhearted people wanted to help Fetlock out of his trouble, and tried to get him to leave Buckner; but the boy showed fright at the thought, and said he "dasn't." Pat Riley urged him, and said:

"You leave the damned hunks and come with me; don't you be afraid. I'll take care of *him*."

The boy thanked him with tears in his eyes, but shuddered and said he "dasn't risk it"; he said Flint would catch him alone, some time, in the night, and then—"Oh, it makes me sick, Mr. Riley, to think of it."

Others said, "Run away from him; we'll stake you; skip out for the coast some night." But all these suggestions failed; he said Flint would hunt him down and fetch him back, just for meanness.

The people could not understand this. The boy's miseries went steadily on, week after week. It is quite likely that the people would have understood if they had known how he was employing his spare time. He slept in an out-cabin near Flint's; and there, nights, he nursed his bruises and his humiliations, and studied and studied over a single problem—how he could murder Flint Buckner and not be found out. It was the only joy he had in life; these hours were the only ones in the twenty-four which he looked forward to with eagerness and spent in happiness.

*The
problem
of
murder*

He thought of poison. No—that would not serve; the inquest would reveal where it was procured and who had procured it. He thought of a shot in the back in a lonely place when Flint would be homeward-bound at midnight—his unvarying hour for the trip. No—somebody might be near, and catch him. He thought of stabbing him in his sleep. No—he might strike an inefficient blow, and Flint would seize him. He examined a hundred different

ways—none of them would answer; for in even the very obscurest and secretest of them there was always the fatal defect of a *risk*, a chance, a possibility that he might be found out. He would have none of that.

But he was patient, endlessly patient. There was no hurry, he said to himself. He would never leave Flint till he left him a corpse; there was no hurry—he would find the way. It was somewhere, and he would endure shame and pain and misery until he found it. Yes, somewhere there was a way which would leave not a trace, not even the faintest clue to the murderer—there was no hurry—he would find that way, and then—oh, then, it would just be good to be alive! Meantime he would diligently keep up his reputation for meekness; and also, as always theretofore, he would allow no one to hear him say a resentful or offensive thing about his oppressor.

Two days before the before-mentioned October morning Flint had bought some things, and he and Fetlock had brought them home to Flint's cabin: a fresh box of candles, which they put in the corner; a tin can of blasting powder, which they placed upon the candle box; a keg of blasting powder, which they placed under Flint's bunk; a huge coil of fuse, which they hung on a peg. Fetlock reasoned that Flint's mining operations had outgrown the pick, and that blasting was about to begin now. He had seen blasting done, and he had a notion of the process, but he had never helped in it. His conjecture was right—blasting time had come. In the morning the pair carried fuse, drills, and the powder-can to the shaft; it was now eight feet deep, and to get into it and out of it a short ladder was used. They descended, and by command Fetlock held the drill—without any instructions as to the right way to hold it—and Flint proceeded to strike. The sledge came down; the drill sprang out of Fetlock's hand, almost as a matter of course.

"You mangy—, is that any way to hold a drill? Pick it up! Stand it up! There—hold fast. D—— you! *I'll* teach you!"

At the end of an hour the drilling was finished.

"Now, then, charge it."

The boy started to pour in the powder.

"Idiot!"

*Revenge
is slow*

*First
lessons*

*The
first
blast*

A heavy bat on the jaw laid the lad out.
"Get up! You can't lie snivelling there. Now, then, stick in the fuse *first*. Now put in the powder. Hold on, hold on! Are you going to fill the hole *all* up? Of all the sap-headed milksops I— Put in some dirt! Put in some gravel! Tamp it down! Hold on, hold on! Oh, great Scott! get out of the way!" He snatched the iron and tamped the charge himself, meantime cursing and blaspheming like a fiend. Then he fired the fuse, climbed out of the shaft, and ran fifty yards away, Fetlock following. They stood waiting a few minutes, then a great volume of smoke and rocks burst high into the air with a thunderous explosion; after a little there was a shower of descending stones; then all was serene again.

*Timing
the
fuse*

"I wish to God you'd been in it!" remarked the master. They went down the shaft, cleaned it out, drilled another hole, and put in another charge.

"Look here! How much fuse are you proposing to waste? Don't you know how to time a fuse!"

"No, sir."

"You *don't*! Well, if you don't beat anything *I* ever saw!"

He climbed out of the shaft and spoke down:

"Well, idiot, are you going to be all day? Cut the fuse and light it!"

The trembling creature began, "If you please, sir, I—"

"You talk back to *me*? Cut it and light it!"

The boy cut and lit.

"Ger-reat Scott! a one-minute fuse! I wish you were in—"

In his rage he snatched the ladder out of the shaft and ran. The boy was aghast.

"Oh, my God! Help! Help! Oh, save me!" he implored. "Oh, what can I do! What *can* I do!"

He backed against the wall as tightly as he could; the sputtering fuse frightened the voice out of him; his breath stood still; he stood gazing and impotent; in two seconds, three seconds, four, he would be flying toward the sky torn to fragments. Then he had an inspiration. He sprang at the fuse and severed the inch of it that was left above ground, and was saved.

*Close to
death*

He sank down limp and half lifeless with fright, his

strength all gone; but he muttered with a deep joy:

"He has learnt me! I knew there was a way, if I would wait."

*Fetlock
finds
a way*

After a matter of five minutes Buckner stole to the shaft, looking worried and uneasy, and peered down into it. He took in the situation; he saw what had happened. He lowered the ladder, and the boy dragged himself weakly up it. He was very white. His appearance added something to Buckner's uncomfortable state, and he said, with a show of regret and sympathy which sat upon him awkwardly from lack of practice:

"It was an accident, you know. Don't say anything about it to anybody; I was excited, and didn't notice what I was doing. You're not looking well; you've worked enough for today; go down to my cabin and eat what you want, and rest. It's just an accident, you know, on account of my being excited."

"It scared me," said the lad, as he started away; "but I learnt something, so I don't mind it."

"Damned easy to please!" muttered Buckner, following him with his eye. "I wonder if he'll tell? Mightn't he? . . . I wish it *had* killed him."

The boy took no advantage of his holiday in the matter of resting; he employed it in work, eager and feverish and happy work. A thick growth of chaparral extended down the mountainside clear to Flint's cabin; the most of Fetlock's labor was done in the dark intricacies of that stubborn growth; the rest of it was done in his own shanty. At last all was complete, and he said:

*Feverish
work*

"If he's got any suspicions that I'm going to tell on him, he won't keep them long, tomorrow. He will see that I am the same milksop as I always was—all day and the next. And the day after tomorrow night there'll be an end of him, and nobody will ever guess who finished him up nor how it was done. He dropped me the idea his own self, and that's odd."

V

The next day came and went.

It is now almost midnight, and in five minutes the new morning will begin. The scene is in the

*Night
of the
tragedy*

A
blight
on
society

The
fifteen-
puzzle

tavern billiard room. Rough men in rough clothing, slouch hats, breeches stuffed into boot-tops, some with vests, none with coats, are grouped about the boiler-iron stove, which has ruddy cheeks and is distributing a grateful warmth; the billiard balls are clacking; there is no other sound—that is, within; the wind is fitfully moaning without. The men look bored; also expectant. A hulking, broad-shouldered miner, of middle age, with grizzled whiskers and an unfriendly eye set in an unsociable face, rises, slips a coil of fuse upon his arm, gathers up some other personal properties, and departs without word or greeting to anybody. It is Flint Buckner. As the door closes behind him a buzz of talk breaks out.

"The regularest man that ever was," said Jake Parker, the blacksmith; "you can tell when it's twelve just by him leaving, without looking at your Waterbury."

"And it's the only virtue he's got, as fur as I know," said Peter Hawes, miner.

"He's just a blight on this society," said Wells-Fargo's man, Ferguson. "If I was running this shop I'd make him say something, *some* time or other, or vamos the ranch." This with a suggestive glance at the barkeeper, who did not choose to see it, since the man under discussion was a good customer, and went home pretty well set up, every night, with refreshments furnished from the bar.

"Say," said Ham Sandwich, miner, "does any of you boys ever recollect of him asking you to take a drink?"

"*Him? Flint Buckner? Oh, Laura!*"

This sarcastic rejoinder came in a spontaneous general outburst in one form of words or another from the crowd. After a brief silence, Pat Riley, miner, said:

"He's the fifteen-puzzle, that cuss. And his boy's another one. *I* can't make them out."

"Nor anybody else," said Ham Sandwich; "and if they are fifteen-puzzles, how are you going to rank up that other one? When it comes to A-1 right-down solid mysteriousness, he lays over both of them. *Easy*—don't he?"

"You bet!"

Everybody said it. Every man but one. He was the new-comer—Peterson. He ordered the drinks all round, and asked who No. 3 might be. All answered at once, "Archy

Stillman!"

"Is he a mystery?" asked Peterson.

"Is *he* a mystery? Is Archy *Stillman* a mystery?" said Wells-Fargo's man, Ferguson. "Why, the fourth dimension's foolishness to *him*."

For Ferguson was learned.

Peterson wanted to hear all about him; everybody wanted to tell him; everybody began. But Billy Stevens, the barkeeper, called the house to order, and said one at a time was best. He distributed the drinks, and appointed Ferguson to lead. Ferguson said:

"Well, he's a boy. And that is just about all we know about him. You can pump him till you are tired; it ain't any use; you won't get anything. At least about his intentions, or line of business, or where he's from, and such things as that. And as for getting at the nature and get-up of his main big chief mystery, why, he'll just change the subject, that's all. You can *guess* till you're black in the face—it's your privilege—but suppose you do, where do you arrive at? Nowhere, as near as I can make out."

"What is his big chief one?"

"Sight, maybe. Hearing, maybe. Instinct, maybe. Magic, maybe. Take your choice—grownups, twenty-five; children and servants, half price. Now I'll tell you what he can do. You can start here, and just disappear; you can go and hide wherever you want to, I don't care where it is, nor how far—and he'll go straight and put his finger on you."

"You don't mean it!"

"I just do, though. Weather's nothing to him—elemental conditions is nothing to him—he don't even take notice of them."

"Oh, come! Dark? Rain? Snow? Hey?"

"It's all the same to *him*. *He* don't give a damn."

"Oh, *say*—including *fog*, per'aps?"

"*Fog!* he's got an eye 't can plunk through it like a bullet."

"Now, boys, honor bright, what's he giving me?"

"It's a fact!" they all shouted. "Go on, Wells-Fargo."

"Well, sir, you can leave him here, chatting with the boys, and you can slip out and go to any cabin in this

*A boy
mystery*

*Not
to be
pumped*

*Can't
hide
from
him*

*Is he
the
devil?*

camp and open a book—yes, sir, a dozen of them—and take the page in your memory, and he'll start out and go straight to that cabin and open every one of them books at the right page, and call it off, and never make a mistake."

"He must be the devil!"

"More than one has thought it. Now I'll tell you a perfectly wonderful thing that he done. The other night he—"

There was a sudden great murmur of sounds outside, the door flew open, and an excited crowd burst in, with the camp's one white woman in the lead and crying:

*Child
lost at
night*

"My child! my child! she's lost and gone! For the love of God help me to find Archy Stillman; we've hunted everywhere!"

Said the barkeeper:

"Sit down, sit down, Mrs. Hogan, and don't worry. He asked for a bed three hours ago, tuckered out tramping the trails the way he's always doing, and went upstairs. Ham Sandwich, run up and roust him out; he's in No. 14."

The youth was soon downstairs and ready. He asked Mrs. Hogan for particulars.

"Bless you, dear, there ain't any; I wish there was. I put her to sleep at seven in the evening, and when I went in there an hour ago to go to bed myself, she was gone. I rushed for your cabin, dear, and you wasn't there, and I've hunted for you ever since, at every cabin down the gulch, and now I've come up again, and I'm that distracted and scared and heartbroke; but, thanks to God, I've found you at last, dearheart, and you'll find my child. Come on! come quick!"

"Move right along; I'm with you, madam. Go to your cabin first."

*The
search
begins*

The whole company streamed out to join the hunt. All the southern half of the village was up, a hundred men strong, and waiting outside, a vague dark mass sprinkled with twinkling lanterns. The mass fell into columns by threes and fours to accommodate itself to the narrow road, and strode briskly along southward in the wake of the leaders. In a few minutes the Hogan cabin was reached.

"There's the bunk," said Mrs. Hogan; "there's where she was; it's where I laid her at seven o'clock; but where

she is now, God only knows."

"Hand me a lantern," said Archy. He set it on the hard earth floor and knelt by it, pretending to examine the ground closely. "Here's her track," he said, touching the ground here and there and yonder with his finger. "Do you see?"

Several of the company dropped upon their knees and did their best to see. One or two thought they discerned something like a track; the others shook their heads and confessed that the smooth hard surface had no marks upon it which their eyes were sharp enough to discover. One said, "Maybe a child's foot could make a mark on it, but I don't see how."

Young Stillman stepped outside, held the light to the ground, turned leftward, and moved along three steps, closely examining; then said, "I've got the direction—come along; take the lantern, somebody."

He strode off swiftly southward, the files following, swaying and bending in and out with the deep curves of the gorge. Thus a mile, and the mouth of the gorge was reached; before them stretched the sagebrush plain, dim, vast, and vague. Stillman called a halt, saying, "We mustn't start wrong, now; we must take the direction again." He took a lantern and examined the ground for a matter of twenty yards; then said, "Come on; it's all right," and gave up the lantern. In and out among the sagebushes he marched, a quarter of a mile, bearing gradually to the right; then took a new direction and made another great semicircle; then changed again and moved due west nearly half a mile—and stopped.

"She gave it up, here, poor little chap. Hold the lantern. You can see where she sat."

But this was in a slick alkali flat which was surfaced like steel, and no person in the party was quite hardy enough to claim an eyesight that could detect the track of a cushion on a veneer like that. The bereaved mother fell upon her knees and kissed the spot, lamenting.

"But where is she, then?" someone said. "She didn't stay here. We can see *that* much, anyway."

Stillman moved about in a circle around the place, with the lantern, pretending to hunt for tracks. "Well!" he said

*On the
trail*

*Follow-
ing an
invisible
clue*

*At
fault*

Vanish-
ing
trail

presently, in an annoyed tone, "I don't understand it." He examined again. "No use. She was here—that's certain; she never *walked* away from here—and that's certain. It's a puzzle; I can't make it out."

The mother lost heart then.

"Oh, my God! oh, blessed Virgin! some flying beast has got her. I'll never see her again!"

"Ah, *don't* give up," said Archy. "We'll find her—don't give up."

"God bless you for the words, Archy Stillman!" and she seized his hand and kissed it fervently.

Peterson, the newcomer, whispered satirically in Ferguson's ear:

"Wonderful performance to find this place, wasn't it? Hardly worthwhile to come so far, though; any other supposititious place would have answered just as well—hey?"

Ferguson was not pleased with the innuendo. He said, with some warmth:

"Do you mean to insinuate that the child hasn't been here? I tell you the child *has* been here! Now if you want to get yourself into as tidy a little fuss as—"

"All right!" sang out Stillman. "Come, everybody, and look at this! It was right under our noses all the time, and we didn't see it."

There was a general plunge for the ground at the place where the child was alleged to have rested, and many eyes tried hard and hopefully to see the thing that Archy's finger was resting upon. There was a pause, then a several-barrelled sigh of disappointment. Pat Riley and Ham Sandwich said, in the one breath:

"What is it, Archy? There's nothing here."

"Nothing? Do you call *that* nothing?" and he swiftly traced upon the ground a form with his finger. "There—don't you recognize it now? It's Injun Billy's track. He's got the child."

"God be praised!" from the mother.

"Take away the lantern. I've got the direction. Follow!"

He started on a run, racing in and out among the sage-bushes a matter of three hundred yards, and disappeared over a sand wave; the others struggled after him, caught him up, and found him waiting. Ten steps away was a

Faith in
Stillman

A new
scent

little wickieup, a dim and formless shelter of rags and old horse blankets, a dull light showing through its chinks.

"You lead, Mrs. Hogan," said the lad. "It's your privilege to be first."

All followed the sprint she made for the wickieup, and saw, with her, the picture its interior afforded. Injun Billy was sitting on the ground; the child was asleep beside him. The mother hugged it with a wild embrace, which included Archy Stillman, the grateful tears running down her face, and in a choked and broken voice she poured out a golden stream of that wealth of worshipping endearments which has its home in full richness nowhere but in the Irish heart.

"I find her bymeby it is ten o'clock," Billy explained. "She 'sleep out yonder, ve'y tired—face wet, been cryin', 'spose; fetch her home, feed her, she heap much hungry—go 'sleep 'gin."

In her limitless gratitude the happy mother waived rank and hugged him too, calling him "the angel of God in disguise."

And he probably was in disguise if he was that kind of an official. He was dressed for the character.

At half past one in the morning the procession burst into the village, singing "When Johnny Comes Marching Home," waving its lanterns, and swallowing the drinks that were brought out all along its course. It concentrated at the tavern, and made a night of what was left of the morning.

*The
lost one
found*

*Made a
night
of it*

*(To be
concluded in the
next issue; in Part Two
there will be a Surprise!!)*

BOOKED & PRINTED

by Mary Cannon



One suspects that K.C. Constantine's readership isn't nearly as large as it should be. This is perversity of the highest order. Constantine has consistently received critical praise, beginning with his first book. *The Rocksburg Railroad Murders* (1972) introduced Police Chief Mario Balzic, an ex-Marine, born in 1924, married to the sensible and understanding Ruth, who has blessed him with two daughters. (Also living in the Balzic family is Mario's mother.) Mario is a native of Rocksburg, Pennsylvania, and he's been a cop on the force in this mid-sized industrial town for twenty-five years. In this first tale, Mario believes that the victim's troubled teenage

stepson is responsible for the fatal beating given John Andrasko. This is not a whodunit in the conventional sense because readers will implicitly accept Balzic's expert opinion. The suspense, therefore, comes from other angles: what makes Balzic so sure of his theory, for example? And what will he say to his daughter Marie—who turned the boy down for a date earlier on the evening of the murder? And, finally, just what drove the boy to such a deed?

The cast of "regulars" appears in subsequent books, too, as well as some added attractions with each title. Lieutenant Harry Minyon of the state police spices up *The Man Who Liked to Look at Himself* (1973). Here's another very tough-to-

Above, the cover of the Penguin edition of K. C. Constantine's *The Man Who Liked Slow Tomatoes*.

take tale that's also a first-class picture of a segment of working class America, a look at the male relationships that stay afloat in kegs of beer and shared tales of babes, a peek at the contemporary woman "scorned." Constantine's language—as always—is often rough, profane, colloquial, and very authentic.

In *The Blank Page* (1974), a coed at the local community college is discovered dead, strangled. Her nude body is covered only by a blank sheet of typing paper. Balzic's investigation reveals the sad affair of the girl's past, one of an early trauma from which she never truly recovered. The college milieu, a fresh one for Balzic, who usually works and plays among cronies of a different class, is wickedly portrayed from a workingman's point of view.

A *Fix Like This* (1975), by comparison, is more tragicomedy. The multiple stabbing of Fat Manny, one of "Don" Dom Muscotti's numbers runners, places Mario in the "fix" of the title. He fears the crime means that Muscotti has broken their sixteen-year-old unwritten contract: "no whores, no dope, no muscle" in Rocksborg. So he

sets out to trail Fat Manny's equally fat brother, Tullio. The humor pales, though, when Tullio beats a man to death with a baseball bat—and then disappears to do it again, to another nice, middle-class man. Mario's immigrant mother provides the connection between the fat brothers and the respectable victims.

In *The Man Who Liked Slow Tomatoes* (1982) Mario tries to balance an impending policemen's strike with his investigation of a missing husband. *Always a Body to Trade* (1983) has Mario humorously coping with a fanatical physical fitness nut who also happens to be Rocksborg's new mayor. But Mario's smugness over the mayor's naiveté vanishes when he learns something himself about Rocksborg, from the Reverend Rutherford Ruffe, local preacher cum crime czar (and a glorious character creation!).

As I said, Constantine deserves the widest audience. The early books should be available in your library, and the most recent two are available in Penguin paperbacks. Do try to find all six books if you want fresh psychological stories with murder in their spines.

MYSTERY REVIEWS

Ed McBain's "Matthew Hope" novels were recently profiled in this column. If you didn't sample the books in this series at that time—or if you did, and liked them as much as I do—you should

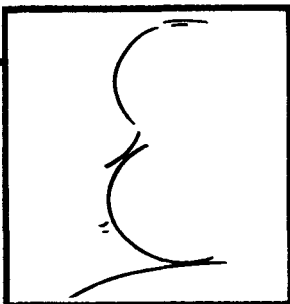
know that there's a new title. **Snow White & Rose Red** (Holt, Rinehart and Winston, \$14.95, 248 pp.), like the others, takes its title from a child's fairy tale. It refers to Sarah Whittaker, a beautiful blonde aristocrat who hires Hope as her lawyer. His growing feeling for her will—so he believes—only aid him in his task: to legally “free” this bright young woman from the expensive mental sanitarium to which she has been consigned. As always, Matthew Hope is full of heart, intelligence, intuition, though the latter almost fails him this time. The ending's a shocker, so I'll say no more.

L.A. Taylor has followed up *Only Half a Hoax* with **Deadly Objectives** (Walker and Company, \$13.95, 233 pp.). Here is J.J. Jamison once again; he's the likable young computer engineer with the amusing Danish office partner. Trouble strikes very close to home when J.J.'s wife and son disappear, not long after the company that employs J.J. loses an invaluable prototype computer. J.J. is enlisted to investigate this case of industrial espionage because of his experience investigating UFO's—or, most often, hoaxes alleged to be UFO's. The two areas of investigation overlap in a near-disastrous manner, and there are tense moments before all ends happily. This is witty, with a fresh background, engaging characters, and an innocent charm.

Greasepaint, footlights, Shakespeare—and murder. It's a winning combination every time, and that goes for P.M. Carlson's **Audition for Murder** (Avon, \$2.75, 224 pp.). This time it's a small band of professional actors hired to do the major roles as guest artists in an upstate New York college production of *Hamlet*. Nick O'Connor (who's playing Claudius) is warned that some of the female students may resent the fact that his beautiful wife Lisette has been cast as Ophelia. But the malice directed toward his wife seems too sophisticated—too deadly—to be the work of a disappointed coed. The theater background and a couple of ingenuous characters fill in a thin plot.

MURDER BY DIRECTION

by Peter Shaw



In *Stick*, comedian Burt Reynolds takes on the relatively straight role of a tough released convict who quickly gets himself into trouble with the underworld. Darkly bearded and talking in a hoarse whisper, Reynolds' Marlon Brando-like Ernest Stickley is an impressive character of mysterious intensity. His seven years in prison sharply mark him off from the easygoing, leisured life of south Florida.

Trying to pick up some quick money, Stick goes along on a seemingly routine transfer of two hundred thousand dollars from one drug dealer to another. But as the friend he is accompanying makes the delivery, he is gunned down by one of his own employer's henchmen. Stick escapes, and from the dark intensity with which he has played the first few scenes we

know he won't rest until he has solved the puzzle of the apparently motiveless killing and avenged his friend.

A nice mystery-thriller situation now develops. Stick is both on the prowl and on the run from his friend's killers, who would like to put him out of the picture. The movie misses a bet by not bringing in the police, since they would nicely complicate matters by pursuing Stick as a suspect ex-con. On the other hand, the supporting actors give excellent performances. Charles Durning plays the rich, fat, pill-popping drug dealer who from his posh penthouse has ordered the death of Stick's friend. The killer, Moke, is a cowboy-suited, sinister, brutal albino. The second drug dealer is an elegant South American who is mixed up in primitive animal worship and *santeria*, a sacrificial cult that



Dar Robinson, Burt Reynolds, and Jose Perez in *Stick*.

kills humans—Stickley's unlucky friend, for one.

Stick now proceeds to shave off his beard to reveal . . . the famous, mustachioed, smiling face of Burt Reynolds. The tough characterization is dropped, along with most of the suspense, and the movie turns into a shoot 'em up comedy.

An exception to the movie's abrupt falling off in quality is George Segal's brash, spirited performance as a foolish but fun-loving millionaire. He smokes big cigars, tells bad jokes, rides delightedly in his yacht and fancy cars, and hangs out with criminals while nervously trying not to get too involved with them.

Up to the point where the movie loses its way, *Stick* follows Edgar award-winning novelist Elmore Leonard's thriller of the same title with reasonable accuracy. But at no point in the book does Stick act like a comic book hero bent singlemindedly on revenge. Furthermore,

though he shows flashes of wit, his lines are in the tough guy tradition of Raymond Chandler, not the genial comedy of Burt Reynolds. As for the book's ending, once Stick realizes what kind of a spot he is in, he realistically abandons revenge in favor of staying alive. He out-smarts the fat drug dealer to the tune of seventy-two thousand dollars, and then lucks out of having to shoot anyone.

Maybe Leonard, who collaborated on the screenplay, will reveal in his next book how Hollywood goes about emasculating a good story. He has complained about the movie's director—Burt Reynolds himself—no doubt because he gave the story its inappropriate comic turn. Until the whole story of the movie comes out, we can take comfort from the fact that despite its vulgar appeals for success, *Stick* has not done well at the box office. One kind of crime, at least, sometimes doesn't pay.

THE STORY THAT WON



The April Mysterious Photograph contest (photo above) was won by Brian McCullough of Kanata, Ontario, Canada. Honorable mentions go to Pamela J. Lobaugh of Redlands, California; Patricia Gardner of East Williston, New York; Colorado Butler of Tsailie, Arizona; Sherry Owens Austin of Concord, North Carolina; D.J. Capps of South Haven, Michigan; Lee Beaston of The Dalles, Oregon; La Donna Lane Grigsby of Broken Arrow, Oklahoma; Scott Gens of Liverpool, New York; Sherry Macmahon of Harper, Texas; Alma Grew of West Hartford, Connecticut; Terri Homan of Waterloo, Iowa; Margaret Arbo of Redondo Beach, California; and Kim E. Nay, Sr., of Noorvik, Alaska.

SEPARATE VACATIONS by Brian McCullough

"Hiram!" The woman screeched his name.

The man carefully picking his way along the broken-down pier stopped and looked down at his wife. She was a sorry sight, tied to the pilings with the rising waters of the San Antonio River lapping about her knees. But he was past feeling any pity.

"Hiram, you better get your butt back down here," she screamed.

The man gazed thoughtfully along the river to the point where it met the ocean. Another couple of hours and there'd be seven feet of water under the pier—and Ethel was only five one in her sock feet. He grunted, satisfied. Forty years under the wicked lash of her tongue was enough for any man.

The woman mistook the distant look in his eyes and appealed to him. "Hiram, honey, I know you. You'll be lonely in that house. Come and untie me and we'll go home together." She smiled up at him. "Would you like that, sweetums? . . . Hiram?"

He hefted her purse in his hand, thinking about the \$7,200 that was in it—their life savings for that big vacation. He looked down at her. "See ya," he said, turning away.

At first she pleaded with him and then she cursed him, but he didn't hear any of it. He was thinking about what she had said—it would be lonely. As he stepped off the pier he decided to go see if Vern Miller had any of them basset pups left.

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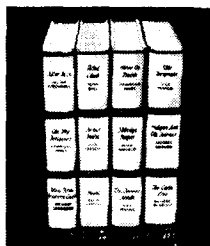
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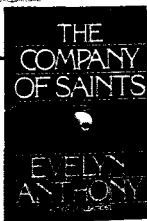
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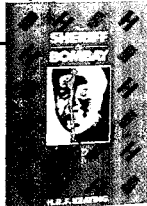
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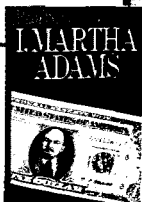
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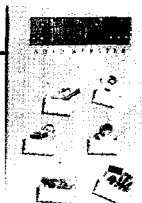
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